





THUMBNAILS

Delhi Police rings in New Year with Bollywood caution: Delhi Police once again stole the social media spotlight on Sunday, weaving a cautionary tale for New Year's Eve with a dash of Bollywood flair. Using the platform X, the police department creatively urged citizens to revel responsibly in the transition to 2024. The advisory took a cinematic turn as it implored, "New Year's eve par 'Mast Mein Rehne Ka', lekin 'Zara Hatke Zara Bachke', agar 'Animal' bankar 'Bawaal' ya 'Nonstop Dhamaal' machaaya toh kahin aisa na ho Ki 2024 la pehla din 'The Great Indian Family' ke bajayee 'Indian Police Force' ke saath man-aana pade."

Woman found dead in Delhi; cops suspect husband's role: A 65-year-old woman was found dead at a plot in the outer Delhi area on Saturday, an official said, adding the police were suspecting her husband's role in the murder. The deceased was identified as Beermati, a resident of Ran-hola village. A police officer said that the incident occurred between 5 to 5.30 a.m. on Saturday and there were cut marks on the neck, hands and legs.

# City grapples with bad air, biting cold

For Haryana, Chandigarh, Delhi and East UP, the weatherman predicts very dense fog today

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE  
NEW DELHI, 31 DECEMBER

Several areas across the northern states, including Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Punjab experienced moderate to dense fog on Sunday morning, the India Meteorological Department said.

The foggy conditions resulting in reduced visibility continued to affect rail, road and air traffic during the early hours. According to IMD forecast, the fog over most parts of North-West, Central and East India is likely to continue for a few days.

The weatherman further said that dense fog will prevail over many parts of Punjab till Monday, and over western Uttar Pradesh till Thursday. For Haryana, Chandigarh, Delhi and East Uttar Pradesh, the weatherman predicted very dense fog till tomorrow.

As for Uttarakhand, the dense fog is likely to continue till Thursday, while in



A child wearing warm clothes amid dense fog on a cold afternoon, at Kartavya path, in the Capital on Sunday. SUBRATA DUTTA

north Madhya Pradesh, north Rajasthan, and Jharkhand it may prevail till Monday, IMD said. The dense fog is also likely to prevail in Odisha, Bihar, Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura till Tuesday.

Delhi, during the morning hours, witnessed a blanket of fog while the city's minimum

temperature settled at 11.7 degrees Celsius, said the Met official.

According to the Northern Railways, around 23 trains were delayed due to the foggy weather conditions. They included Purushottam Express, Chennai-New Delhi GT Express, Hyderabad-New

Delhi, Sealdah-New Delhi Rajdhani and Bhopal-Nizamuddin Express.

The bone-chilling cold alone was not the cause of the misery of the residents of the national capital. Toxic air continued to batter the people as the average Air Quality Index on Sunday measured at 382, falling in the 'very poor' quality, the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) said. The air quality is likely to remain under the Very Poor category from January 1-3, said the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (IITM), adding that weather conditions are extremely unfavourable for effective dispersion of pollutants.

The air monitoring agency has cautioned the residents against air quality which might further deteriorate if the people continued to burn crackers during celebrations to mark the New Year. "The outlook for subsequent six days: The air quality is likely to remain in the Very Poor category," the IITM said.

Daily average AQI for Delhi during 2023 was 204

NEW DELHI, 31 DECEMBER

The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change on Sunday said the average daily Air Quality Index for Delhi during the entire year 2023 has been the best so far since 2018 and even before that, barring 2020, which saw an exceptional AQI owing to continued spells of lockdown and low anthropogenic activities round the year.

The daily average AQI for Delhi during the year 2023 was 204. In the year 2021 and 2022, the daily average AQI for the city was 209. In 2018, the daily average AQI for Delhi was 225, in the year 2019, it was 215 while in the year 2020 it was 185. The year 2023 also witnessed much lower levels of episodic events like farm burnings during paddy harvesting season, bursting of crackers during religious festivals and marriages/celebrations etc, the Ministry said. However, the benefit attributable to the same in Delhi's AQI, was nullified owing to much adverse climatic, meteorological, low temperature and calm wind conditions in the region, impeding effective dispersion of the pollutants and resulting in a spike in the daily average AQI during the winter months in particular.

AAP talks about development unlike other parties: Kejriwal



STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE  
NEW DELHI, 31 DECEMBER

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal said here on Sunday that the work done by the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) government in Punjab in the last two years shows that if the party has a government in the entire state, it can work much faster.

The AAP national convenor, who presided over the party's National Executive and 12th National Council meeting today, said the party has achieved unprecedented success in the last 12 years.

Party officials from across the country participated in both the meetings held through virtual medium. Kejriwal claimed that his

party achieved what other parties could not in 75 years. "The work we have done has never been done by any other party. We started talking about education, health, electricity, inflation and employment, which no other party had ever done.

For the first time in the country people got a real alternative to these parties and people started liking the politics of work," he contended.

"The work that has been done in Punjab within two years shows how fast the AAP can work if we have a government in the entire state. Today, more work has been done in many areas of Punjab than the work we did in Delhi in 8-9 years," he said.

## 'Raahgiri Day' held at Connaught Place

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE  
NEW DELHI, 31 DECEMBER

Delhi Police, Delhi Traffic Police and the New Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC) in partnership with Raahgiri Foundation organised a 'Raahgiri Day' on Sunday at Inner Circle, Connaught Place from 7 am to 10 am.

A lot of activities such as puppet shows, yoga and zumba sessions, flash mob dance, road safety awareness, nukkad natak and pep-talk sessions were organized on the occasion.

During the event, quiz competition on road safety was also organised by the Delhi Traffic Police and prizes were given to the winning participants.

Other major attractions included a painting competition by school students; a road safety workshop for public awareness by the Delhi Traffic Police; dog show by the Crime Branch of Delhi Police,



orchestra by Delhi Police Band and a demonstration on self-defence techniques by Delhi Police. Activities on road safety were organised by WRI Foundation and prizes were given to the participants, etc.

Citizens of all age groups participated in games and

activities like chess, tug-of-war, cricket, badminton, etc. About 1500 people participated in this event. The event was graced by senior officers of the Delhi Police, Delhi Administration, various civic interest groups, youth groups and NGOs, etc.

## Assam CM meets Goyal, calls for launch of North East Industrial Policy



STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE  
NEW DELHI, 31 DECEMBER

Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma called on Union Minister for Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal at his office at Udyog Bhawan here and discussed issues relating to the north-eastern state, a government official said on Sunday.

During the 40-minute long interaction, the official said the Chief Minister Sarma apprised the Union minister about the rapid progress his

state has made on the industrial front with new investments pouring in.

The chief minister urged the Centre to launch the North East Industrial Policy as Assam and the North East region have been witnessing rapid economic growth and it would give an added impetus to the existing efforts, said Sabir Nishat, Deputy Director of Assam Information Centre, New Delhi.

Giving a patient hearing to the chief minister, Goyal assured him that his propos-

al to launch the North East Industrial Policy would be under active consideration of his ministry.

Earlier, Sarma, while apprising about his meeting with the minister in a post on social media, wrote, "So much to learn from our extremely learned Union Minister Piyush Goyal ji. Given that Assam and the North East are witnessing rapid economic growth, it will be opportune to launch the North East Industrial Policy to augment to existing efforts, I urged him."

Mewat-based ATM breaking gang busted

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE  
NEW DELHI, 31 DECEMBER

The Delhi Police Special Cell has busted an inter-state gang of criminals involved in ATM breakings, with the arrest of its kingpin identified as Mohammad Jahid, the police said on Sunday.

According to police, the gang was based in Mewat region, with its kingpin belonging to Haryana's Nuh, who was previously involved in 15 criminal cases across Delhi and other states, including 14 ATM breakings in Delhi, MP, Haryana, and Assam.

Police have identified the remaining members of the gang, and efforts are being made to nab them, a police official said.

Jahid is a habitual offender and was also declared as a Proclaimed Offender in two cases against him.

The police have cracked a case of ATM breaking in Delhi, a police official said.

Interestingly, Jahid was apprehended by the special cell team while he was said to be

on his way to Guwahati, Assam to allegedly execute another ATM heist, while his associates awaited his arrival in the North Eastern state, the police said.

The police teams who were tracking the gang received an input about a gang member's arrival at Palam, New Delhi, on December 25 evening, and consequently, a team laid a trap near Palam Airport, and ended up nabbing Jahid.

It was also revealed during the probe that his associates had recently stolen Rs 7.5 lakh from an ATM in North East Delhi's Welcome area, and a case was also lodged for the incident.

The police further informed that the members of this gang used to identify unguarded ATMs in less-lit and isolated areas, and thereafter, conduct a thorough reconnaissance of the area.

They would sprinkle black paint on the CCTV cameras after entering the ATM booths and would also wear face masks and monkey cap to conceal their identities.

## Security beefed up in city to ensure peaceful New-Year celebrations

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE  
NEW DELHI, 31 DECEMBER

As residents of Delhi geared up to bid adieu to 2023 and welcome 2024 with celebrations and revelry security arrangements heightened across the national capital on the eve of New Year to ensure a smooth passage of the festivities.

Police pickets have been increased and additional police force has been deployed at locations where the New Year celebrations are expected as part of the arrangements, especially at the places where high footfall of people is expected.

The Delhi Police Special Cell

conducted a mock drill at a prominent mall in South Delhi's Saket prior to the festive atmosphere, to check security preparedness.

The cops will be working in multiple shifts at various places across the city to ensure peaceful celebrations. Women police personnel will also be on duty to ensure security to the girls and women taking part in the celebrations.

According to the police, special teams have been deployed to keep a check on reckless and stunt driving. Those found involved in hooliganism or any such activities will be meted out with strict

action as per law.

Strict vigil will be kept on the border points of the city, along with the deployment of traffic police teams to keep a check on the drink-and-drive incidents.

Police personnel in civil dress will also be present at the places of large gatherings to keep a check on the anti-social elements and to thwart any untoward incident.

Earlier, the police had announced traffic arrangements and diversions to be put in place to ensure that there are no traffic jams, and problems faced by the people heading out for the celebrations.

## Kejriwal totally failed Delhi, says BJP chief Sachdeva

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE  
NEW DELHI, 31 DECEMBER

Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva on Sunday claimed that Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has totally "failed" Delhi in 2023 and "corruption" has become the identity of his government.

In a press release issued to the media, Sachdeva said, "From 2015 to 2022, we have heard Arvind Kejriwal say that the day Delhiites give me power in Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) I will transform Delhi into the best city but a year later Delhi stands out as the worst metropolitan city of India. Delhiites gave majority to AAP in



the MCD trusting Kejriwal but shockingly a year after Kejriwal in power in both Delhi government and MCD, the city is in a dismal state."

Recalling Kejriwal's promise to clear the three landfill

sites in a year, he said, "Today a new mountain of garbage has come up at Ghazipur landfill site while they have turned parts of Sanjay Van at Mehrauli into a new garbage dumping site. Sanitation

across Delhi is at its worst today. Garbage dumps can be seen at roadsides across the city," he said.

On the rising pollution level in the national capital, the BJP leader said, "Due to dust pollution is so bad that on 31 December the AQI level has been recorded between 390 and 422 at different observation centres. The dust Pollution is a local factor and badly maintained PWD and MCD roads are responsible for it."

On the education front, Sachdeva said Delhi's schools, both the ones run by the Delhi government and those run by the MCD are in a poor state not only due to lack of teachers but also lack of

arrangements to teach science and commerce at senior secondary level.

On the health sector, he said, "Condition of Delhi government, MCD hospitals and clinics is pathetic with patients getting dates from 12 to 18 months for basic tests and operations. Shockingly, the last month of the year has exposed that government hospitals give fake and below medical standard medicines."

(Former) Delhi ministers and an MP are in jail without bail, the year 2023 has gone down in history as a year with corruption becoming the identity of the Kejriwal government shaming Delhiites," said Sachdeva.

## Delhi BJP leaders, workers listen to PM's Mann Ki Baat

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE  
NEW DELHI, 31 DECEMBER

Delhi BJP leaders and unit party workers listened to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's monthly radio programme 'Mann Ki Baat' on Sunday in different events organised across the national capital.

Senior leaders of the saffron party participated in some special programmes organised at various places to listen to the 108th episode of the Mann Ki Baat, while the party workers were present at the organisational booths.

In a special programme organised at Delhi Gate Ward, BJP's national general secretary Tarun Chugh listened to 'Mann Ki Baat' with local workers, in presence of Delhi



BJP leaders Tarun Chugh, Virender Sachdeva and others listen to 'Mann Ki Baat' in the Capital on Sunday. SUBRATA DUTTA

BJP president Virendra Sachdeva and general secretary Harsh Malhotra.

In another special programme at Booth 29 of Janakpuri Assembly, Delhi BJP organisation general sec-

retary Pawan Rana along with hundreds of youths listened to the monthly programme in the presence of Jammu and Kashmir co-in-charge Ashish Sood.

Union Minister of State Meenakshi Lekhi and Leader of Opposition in Delhi Assembly Ramvir Singh Bidhuri listened to the Maan Ki Baat along with hundreds of central government schemes beneficiaries in the presence of Karol Bagh district president Sunil Kakkar during the Viksit Bharat Yatra Mela, organized in Indrapuri in Rajinder Nagar assembly constituency.

MP Ramesh Bidhuri listened to the programme with local slum dwellers of Kalicharan Camp, Okhla Subzi Mandi. Delhi BJP's Minority Mor-

cha at Jama Masjid Park, president Anees Abbasi along with hundreds of party workers of BJP and social workers also listened to the radio programme.

"Prime Minister Narendra Modi always gives some new message in the Mann Ki Baat program and this 108th episode also becomes important because he has given the message of Fit India to the youth of the country. He has asked youth to resolve to be fitness conscious," said Delhi BJP chief.

Sachdeva added, "The country gives us everything, hence we should also give something for the country and youth should join the Fit India Movement as per the message of Prime Minister Narendra Modi."

## Fire stations put on alert mode: Atul Garg

STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE  
NEW DELHI, 31 DECEMBER

Delhi Fire Services (DFS) Director Atul Garg on Sunday said that fire stations have been put on alert mode in the city as a precautionary measure on New Year's Eve.

Garg said that fire tenders would also be deployed at different locations in the national capital. "DFS has made elaborate arrangements for the safety of citizens of Delhi on the eve of New Year. In addition, fire stations are on alert mode," Garg wrote in a post on X.

He further said, "The fire tenders will be deployed at various locations to promptly address emergencies. Happy New Year to all."

Places where the fire tenders would be stationed



include Connaught Place, Hauz Khas Village Market, Aero City, Lajpat Nagar, Majnu Ka Tila, Mukherjee Nagar, Rani Bagh Market, Kalkaji Temple and near Pacific Mall in Rajouri Garden.

Meanwhile, the Delhi Police has geared up to ensure incident-free New Year celebrations in the national capital by deploying personnel at key locations expected to witness high footfall.

Heavy police deployment has been made at Connaught Place, India Gate, Aerocity, Qutub Minar, Greater Kailash, Saket Mall, Netaji Subhash Place, Mukherjee Nagar area, Vasant Kunj Mall, EDM Mall, Pacific Mall, Champa Gali, Hudson Lane and Hauz Khas to ward off any untoward incident. These locations are expected to draw a large number of revellers on New Year's Eve.







India will develop only if we discharge our duties honestly...

YOGI ADITYANATH  
UTTAR PRADESH CHIEF MINISTER

# Won't send tableau in rejected category list, says Punjab CM

'The state won't not send its tableaux as per it as the martyrs of the country do not need NOC of the BJP'

AGENCIES  
CHANDIGARH, 31 DECEMBER

Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann on Sunday said the state government would not send its tableau in the rejected category list of the Union government as martyrs of the country don't need "non-objection certificate (NOC) from the BJP".

In a statement here, the Chief Minister said the great martyrs, including Shaheed Bhagat Singh, Shaheed Rajguru, Shaheed Sukhdev, Lala Lajpat Rai, Shaheed Udhham Singh, Shaheed Kartar Singh Sarabha, Mai Bhago, Ghadri Baabe and others, cannot be kept in rejected category.

He said the Union government "is trying to belittle their contribution and sacrifice of these heroes by not including their tableaux in the Republic Day parade".

Mann's assertions come in the wake of the Ministry of Defence clarifying that Pun-



jab, Delhi and west Bengal tableaux were not included in the Republic Day Parade as they were not aligned with the broader themes of this year's tableau.

Their criticism of tableau not being selected for the Republic Day Parade is not objective and unfounded, it said in a statement.

Mann responded by saying "this cannot be tolerated as it is the grave insult of these great patriots and national leaders".

The Chief Minister said the Union government had in a letter written on December 30 asked the state as per clause 8 of the memorandum of understanding (MOU) signed with the states for Republic Day Parade, the state/union territory which will not be selected for Republic Day Parade will be given an opportunity to display the tableau during Bharat Parv to be organised at the Red Fort, New Delhi, during January 23-31. Mann said that in

this 'Parv', stalls of all states and union territories based on their famous food, cuisines, traditions, product, handicrafts and festivals will be showcased.

He said after the Bharat Parv the tableaux of states and UTs may be displayed in the respective state's and UT's functions as per their discretion.

However, the Chief Minister unequivocally said the state will not send its tableaux as per it as the martyrs of the country do not need NOC of the BJP, adding Punjab "knows how to respect the patriots and martyrs".

He said "these are the heroes of the country and the entire country is indebted to them for their supreme sacrifices made for the nation".

Mann said the state government does not need support from the Union government to showcase their heroes, rather it is capable enough to pay tributes to them.

## Israel Embassy blast case transferred to special cell of Delhi Police

AGENCIES  
NEW DELHI, 31 DECEMBER

The Israel Embassy blast case has been transferred to the special cell of Delhi Police and an FIR was registered at Tughlak Road Police Station.

As per Delhi Police, now special cell will lead the further investigations in the case. The suspicious blast that took place near the Israel Embassy on December 26.

"The case has been transferred to the special cell of Delhi Police. The special cell will further investigate the matter; the FIR was registered at Tughlak Road Police Station of New Delhi District. New Delhi district also handed over the initial observation report of central agencies to a special cell," said a statement from Delhi police.

According to Delhi Police, the component of the blast was yet to be ascertained and therefore, they have been waiting for forensic reports to come. The samples of leaves and soil from the spot were collected by forensic experts from the National Security Group (NSG) and Delhi Police on Wednesday.



The Delhi Police have launched a search operation in the whole area, in which the people who passed the spot just before the incident were interrogated. Apart from this, all the taxi and auto drivers who had passed Prithvi Raj Road and Abdul Kalam Road were also interrogated thoroughly.

On Tuesday, Delhi Police received a call that a 'blast' was heard near the Israeli Embassy in the Chanakypuri diplomatic enclave, but officials said that nothing as such was found at the spot of the incident.

Paramilitary forces have been deployed outside the Israeli Embassy in Delhi, two

days after the police received a call about a 'blast' being heard near the area. The sound of the blast was heard by the security official standing near the Israel embassy, which informed an official of the FSL team.

Delhi Special Cell, Dog Squad and NIA officials carried out an investigation outside the Israel Embassy. The Delhi police have zeroed in on two 'suspects' after examining the CCTV footage of the area.

Officials have, however, not confirmed the duo's involvement in the same. Israel's Deputy Ambassador to India, Ohad Nakash Kaynar, confirmed that all the workers and the diplomats at the Israel embassy were safe.

"All our workers are safe, and all our diplomats are safe. Our security teams are working in full cooperation with the local Delhi security and they will investigate the matter further," he said.

A security guard standing near the embassy said, "I heard a loud noise at around 5 p.m. The noise was similar to a tyre burst. I also saw smoke going up near a tree."

## Himachal Pradesh CM Sukhu takes stroll on Mall Road on New Year's Eve

AGENCIES  
SHIMLA, 31 DECEMBER

On New Year's Eve today, Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Thakur Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu, accompanied by his cabinet colleagues, took a stroll on the historic Mall Road of Shimla, extending warm greetings to the public and tourists.

The Chief Minister also visited the Winter Carnival at the Ridge and enjoyed the cultural programme.

On the occasion, he said that the government was promoting tourism activities in the state in a big way and organized the Winter Carnival at Shimla for the first time. He wished the people on New Year and said that the clean environment, lush green valleys and dense forests of the state attract tourists from far and wide.

He also thanked the people for their invaluable support during the recent natural calamity the state had

faced and said that with the collaborative efforts of the people and the state government, Himachal now was ready to welcome the tourists.

Mayor Municipal Corporation Shimla, Surennder Chauhan honoured the Chief Minister and his cabinet colleagues on the occasion.

Deputy Chief Minister, Mukesh Agnihotri, Industries Minister Harshwardhan Chauhan, Education Minister, Rohit Thakur, Rural Development and Panchayati Raj Minister Anirudh Singh, PWD Minister Vikramaditya Singh, Cabinet Minister Yadindra Goma, MLAs Harish Janartha and Kewal Singh Pathania were also present on the occasion amongst others.

Meanwhile, after witnessing an influx of tourists during Christmas, a large number of tourists are thronging Manali to ring in the New Year. In view of the increased tourist influx, Himachal Tourism as well as all the hotels have made all kinds of

preparations for the New Year celebration in Manali.

The tourists danced with the locals and the tourists had a lot of fun on the beat of drums on the famous Mall Road of Manali to ring in the New Year.

Luvna Khan, a tourist who came to Manali from Mumbai, said, "I have reached Manali to celebrate the New Year. A large number of people have arrived here in order to celebrate the New Year. The culture of Himachal is very beautiful, it is nice to see the people here, the food and the mountains and rivers here." Another tourist, Ritu, who came from Chandigarh to celebrate the New Year in Manali, shared her experience.

"We have reached Kullu Manali in Himachal to celebrate the New Year. I am enjoying the culture of Himachal and the food here, including the special 'Siddu'. We also enjoyed the dance of women in traditional costumes," Ritu said.

## 2023: BSF detected, downed 107 drones from Pak, seized 442 kg heroin in Punjab

AGENCIES  
CHANDIGARH, 31 DECEMBER

The Border Security Force, responsible for safeguarding the 553-km long varied, tough, and challenging India-Pakistan border in Punjab, on Sunday said that in the last one year, it detected and downed 107 drones and seized 442.395 kg of heroin.

Besides seizing 23 weapons and 505 rounds of ammunition, it has killed three Pakistani intruders, apprehended 23 Pakistan nationals, including two smugglers, 14 Bangladeshi nationals, and 95 Indian suspects, including 35 smugglers, in different incidents.

Braving innumerable challenges, including inclement weather conditions and the spate of smuggling, BSF men are guarding borders round the clock with unflinching dedication.

During 2023, the BSF troopers of the Punjab Frontier have handed over 12 Pak-



istani nationals, who had inadvertently crossed the international border, to Pakistan Rangers.

The BSF organised 99 security meetings with sister agencies, including five security coordination meetings with Punjab Police in Jalandhar, Amritsar, and Chandigarh and six security coordination meetings with the Indian Army in Jalandhar, an official statement by the BSF said.

During the unprecedented-

dering areas but ensures their well-being through various civic action programmes. These encompass free medical camps, skill development training, coaching for Central Armed Police Forces and army recruitment, sports tournaments, and cultural activities.

Additionally, the BSF makes concerted efforts to assist the needy residents in the bordering areas. To create awareness against the menace of drugs amongst the youth and local populace of bordering areas, cycle rallies, awareness campaigns and walkathons were organised by the BSF with active participation of the local youth, which has been appreciated by people from all walks of society. A significant milestone was achieved with the inauguration of the tallest flagpole of 418 ft in the Indian sub-continent at the integrated checkpoint (ICP) at Attari near Amritsar by Union Road Transport Minister Nitin Gadkari.

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## Sanskrit teacher held for allegedly killing mother

AGENCIES  
NEW DELHI, 31 DECEMBER

A 65-year-old woman was allegedly killed by her youngest daughter over a property dispute in Delhi, police said on Sunday, adding that they have arrested the accused. The deceased was identified as Beermati, a resident of Ran-hola village. A police officer said that the incident occurred between 5 to 5.30 a.m. on Saturday and there were cut marks on her neck, hands, and legs. During the probe, it was revealed that Beermati went to her plot near her house at around 5 a.m. and when her son Devender's wife Asha went to the plot at about 5.30 a.m., she found her mother-in-law dead inside the plot.

There was a dispute regarding property in the family and her husband, Ishwar, 70, who is an ex-serviceman and turned towards spirituality, used to reside somewhere outside, the police officer said.

## J&K: As New Year fervour sets in, people groove to music in Srinagar

AGENCIES  
SRINAGAR, 31 DECEMBER

As the New Year fervour set in, people grooved to music at Lal Chowk in Jammu and Kashmir's Srinagar. They danced with joy amid New Year celebrations.

Meanwhile, the Jammu and Kashmir Police have tightened security in the Udhampur district ahead of the New Year celebrations. The JK police have put up barricades at strategic locations to conduct security checks on the Jammu Srinagar national highway for the safe and smooth conduct of the celebrations.

Police personnel will check four-wheelers and motorcyclists at the locations. The officials have also appealed to visitors to celebrate New Year's Eve safely.

Senior Superintendent of Police, Udhampur Joginder Singh, said that he expects a



large influx of visitors to Patnitop Hill Station and other popular tourist destinations on December 31. Singh said that the police department has made elaborate preparations to handle the expected crowds.

He said that police and traffic police personnel will be deployed on the roads to manage traffic and ensure the safety of visitors.

Singh further appealed to visitors to be disciplined and to follow traffic rules. He said that everyone should be careful and look out for each other.

He also said that visitors should be aware of the traffic rules and guidelines.

"We want everyone to have a safe and enjoyable New Year's Eve. Please cooperate with the police and help us make this a memorable event for everyone," Singh said.

Meanwhile, Jammu and Kashmir's Gulmarg is all decked up with colourful lights as the city is gearing up to welcome 2024.

Meanwhile, on New Year Eve, 'Ganga' Aarti was performed at the Ganga Ghat in Uttarakhand's Rishikesh.

Visuals showed people gathered at the Ghat participating in the grand 'Aarti'. Some foreigners were also seen grooving with enthusiasm as the priests were performing the rituals and the crowd was doing 'Aarti' with fervour.

An 'Aarti' was also performed at the Ganga Ghat in Uttar Pradesh's Prayagraj.

### WELCOME NEW YEAR



Girls pose for a picture displaying '2024' as they welcome the upcoming year on the last day of the year 2023, in Bhopal on Sunday.

## Despite challenges, we can work to create better world: Dalai Lama on New Year



AGENCIES  
DHARAMSALA, 31 DECEMBER

Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama on Sunday thanked everyone for sending New Year wishes, saying despite many challenges the "world is facing today, I feel optimistic that with a growing appreciation of how interconnected we all are in the oneness of humanity, we can all work to lead more meaningful lives and create a better world".

"As human beings we share a common wish to be happy and free from pain. We are social animals who depend on others to survive. Therefore, as I often say, we should work for the benefit of others. If we cannot help them, we should

at least make sure we do no harm. I have found that helping others is the best way of ensuring happiness and calm for ourselves. "I also firmly believe that we can find peace in the world only when we find peace within. Every human being has the potential to cultivate inner peace, and by so doing to contribute to the peace of our global community," he said in a message for New Year 2024. The spiritual leader further said, "We must try to cultivate compassion and inner peace, regardless of our nationality or religion, we can contribute to the well-being and happiness of all mankind. If the last century was the century of violence, it is our responsibility to make this century the century of dialogue." "Once again, I extend warm greetings to you all. I hope that you all enjoy an auspicious beginning to the New Year, 2024," he added.

## Devastation in HP and U'khand in recent years: NGT forms panel on declaration of higher Himalayas as eco-sensitive zone

BHAWANI NEGI  
SHIMLA, 31 DECEMBER

Taking suo motu cognisance of a science article on the higher Himalayas, suggesting that due to constant damage and deterioration of natural conditions of the area, it must be declared as an "Eco Sensitive Zone", the National Green Tribunal (NGT) has formed a joint committee for a factual report on the issue.

The members of the committee will be a senior representative of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, an expert nominated by the Director of GB



Pant Institute of Himalayan Studies, and a Professor nominated by the Director of IIT Roorkee, who is an expert in the field of Civil Engineering. The Committee shall exam-

ine the matter, if necessary, visit the site concerned, collect relevant information, study the matter, and submit a detailed factual report with all relevant materials within

three months, said the Tribunal.

The science article published in a magazine pointed out that the recent disasters in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh have reignited the debate about the anthropogenic impact on higher Himalayan valleys and the potentially increased impact of disasters in the region. It is feared that under the impending climate change scenario, the sustainability of the geologically fragile Higher Himalayan Eco-System would be threatened, endangering the safety of infrastructure such as habitation

sites, roads, and hydropower projects.

The NGT observed that the Himalayas have a large number of glaciers that sustain millions of people inhabiting the Indo-Gangetic Plains. It is now being increasingly considered that similar to the Bhagirathi Eco-Sensitive Zone, the river stretches between the head-waters till the southern flank of Main Central Thrust (MCT) covering a stretch of 125 km should be declared as an Eco-Sensitive Zone.

The science article further said that an outcome of continent-continent colli-

sion was the maximum horizontal shortening of the Higher Himalayan domain along the MCT, for example, extreme topography developed with an elevation range of <1000->7,000 m as in Uttarakhand and Himachal Himalayas.

"This is manifested by the over-steepened topography, the presence of convexity along the river longitudinal profile, and the development of stationary knick points. These features suggest that uplift (convergence) is outpacing the incision (downcutting by the river), thus implying that the slopes of the

Higher Himalayan valleys are unstable," said the NGT.

The Himalayan rivers contribute 10% of the total global sediment budget, where 44% of total sediments are stored in the glacially scoured Higher Himalayan valleys. "Therefore, it is considered that the Higher Himalayan valleys are sediment-surplus and transport-limited," observed the NGT. Studies in the Satluj basin indicated that the Higher Himalayan paraglacial valleys have been the source of sediments for the last 14,000 years. These sediments sometimes damage the hydropower project gates constructed

in the Higher Himalayas. "For example, the radial gates of the Vishnuprayag Hydropower Project in the Alaknanda Valley were damaged during the June 2013 floods and, more recently, during the July 2023 Beas floods, the Malana dam gates were obstructed by sediments in the Parvati Valley," observed NGT. "Unusual weather events in the Himalayas are showing an increasing trend. This is manifested by the rise in the frequencies and magnitude of springtime forest fire events, avalanches, flash floods, and landslides," added the NGT.







# Memento Mori -- A kedgereee of realisations, ruminations and plutocratic pantomimes

ANWESHA SANTRA

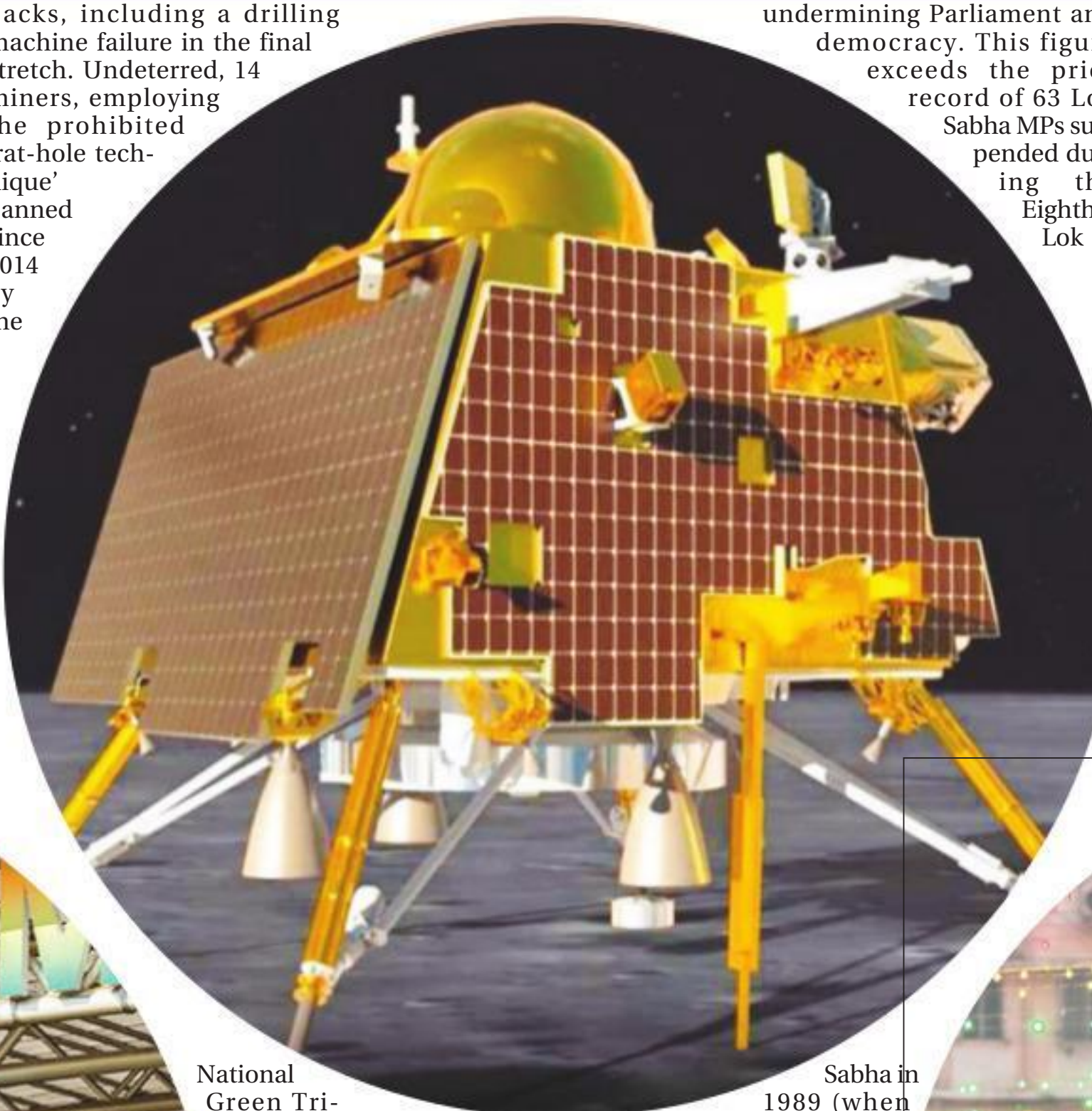
Cheers to another trip around the sun! The clock has struck midnight, the confetti has settled and the curtains have closed on the grand performance that was the past year. From promising to hit the gym every day (only to discover that our favourite exercise is lifting a fork) and vowing to learn a new language (hello, Duolingo owl, we meet again) to being entertained by the ever-appealing theatrics of politicians — we've all been there, done that. Picture it as a cosmic cabaret where personal resolutions pirouetted, occasionally stumbling over the complexities of reality. Health goals were forgotten in the tempting embrace of the couch and a tub of ice cream... Diaries were opened, eager pens poised in anticipation, yet most pages

In the ongoing odyssey of space triumphs, **Aditya L1**, the solar mission spearheaded by ISRO, is poised to reach the Lagrange point 1 (L1) of the Sun-Earth system on 6 January. This strategic position will afford the spacecraft an unobstructed view of the sun, free from any eclipses, as shared by ISRO chief Somanath.

Adding to the celestial narrative, India initiated the ascent of the **Gaganyaan spacecraft** on 21 October, marking the commencement of a series of test flights preceding its slated mission to transport astronauts into space. Gaganyaan's goal is to launch humans into space placing them in a low earth orbit at an altitude of 400 kilometres for a three-day mission in 2025.

Guiding the course of the **G20 Summit**, India hosted a two-day summit in New Delhi on 9-10

backs, including a drilling machine failure in the final stretch. Undeterred, 14 miners, employing the prohibited 'rat-hole technique' banned since 2014 by the



undermining Parliament and democracy. This figure exceeds the prior record of 63 Lok Sabha MPs suspended during the Eighth Lok

finals against Australia. Despite winning every prior match, the elusive **victory slipped through India's fingers**, leaving a nation in cricket-induced melancholy.

In the melancholic narrative of the year 2023, tragic deaths unfurled as solemn threads, weaving a sorrowful pattern that left an ineffaceable mark on the passage of time. The weight of these losses permeates the collective consciousness, underscoring the inherent fragility of human existence.

Since 3 May, the state of **Manipur has been marred by ethnic violence**. The conflict unfolded between the Meitei people, predominantly residing in the Imphal Valley, and the Kuki-Zo tribal community situated in the surrounding hills. The ongoing strife has resulted in over 180 casualties and left thousands

solemn reminder of a tragic underwater expedition.

Beginning on 6 February, **Turkey and Syria were shaken by a sequence of five successive earthquakes**, culminating in a devastating toll of over **19,000** lives lost and tens of thousands left injured. The initial quake, with a magnitude of 7.8, originated in the Pazarcik district.

On 7 October, Hamas attacked Israeli cities, causing approximately 1,200 deaths and taking over 200 hostages. Despite releasing more than 100 hostages through ceasefire agreements, the **Israel-Palestine conflict** continues, resulting in 20,057 Palestinians killed and 53,320 wounded, with widespread destruction and the displacement of Gaza's majority population.

The passing of the year also marked the **departure of several notable figures**, including

Fathima Beevi, India's first female Supreme Court Judge; Henry



National Green Tribunal, took charge, digging the last 12 metres to reach the trapped individuals. Representing a noteworthy

Kashmir assembly elections by September 2024 and urged prompt statehood restoration. The ruling concurred with the Union's argument, affirming Article 370's temporary status under Part XXI of the constitution.

Continuing in the legal realm, a 3:2 majority decision by a five-judge Supreme Court bench on 17 October upheld

Sabha in 1989 (when Rajiv Gandhi held the position of Prime Minister).

Recently



approved

by the Parliament, **three criminal law bills secured President Droupadi Murmu's assent**. These bills include the Bharatiya Nyaya (Second) Sanhita,

aiming to substitute the Indian Penal Code 1860; the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha (Second) Sanhita, intending to replace the Code of Criminal Procedure 1973; and the Bharatiya Sakshya (Second) Sanhita, which seeks to supplant the Indian Evidence Act 1872.

India's ICC World Cup 2023 journey was a rollercoaster of triumphs, except for the heart-

**"Our Life is nothing but a Winter's Day; Some only break their Fast, and so away. Others stay Dinner, and depart full fed. The deepest Age but sups and goes to bed."**

remained woefully blank, as the chaos of life unfolded in unexpected plot twists. And then there were the politicians, the maestros of rhetoric and masters of promises. Their oratory acrobatics left audiences in

structural milestone, India revealed its **new Parliament building** on 28 May, celebrated as a symbol of the nation's culture and pride. Positioned next to the current Parliament House and built at a cost of Rs 971 crore, the new structure has the

the validity of the Special Marriage Act, 1954, while **rejecting the legalisation of same-sex marriage** in the *Supriyo @ Supriya Chakraborty v Union of India* case. The court clarified that recognising such rights or compelling Parliament to enact relevant laws is beyond its jurisdiction. However, the Centre was directed to form a cabinet committee to address the rights of homosexual couples in India.

In the ongoing winter session, a historic high of **100 Lok Sabha MPs and 46 Rajya Sabha MPs have faced suspension**—the most in a single parliamentary session. This surge is linked to the Opposition's demand for a statement on the security breach in Parliament. Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge criticised the government, accusing it of

aiming to substitute the Indian Penal Code 1860; the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha (Second) Sanhita, intending to replace the Code of Criminal Procedure 1973; and the Bharatiya Sakshya (Second) Sanhita, which seeks to supplant the Indian Evidence Act 1872.

India's ICC World Cup 2023 journey was a rollercoaster of triumphs, except for the heart-

## ARTICLE 370



awe, their commitments soaring to the heavens like fireworks, only to fizzle out in the cold reality of governance.

So, as we embark on this new chapter in the book of time, let's not just raise a toast to the arbitrary change in the calendar. Let's raise our pens, our voices and our eyebrows in a collective nod to the year that was.

In a cosmic spectacle, India took centre stage in July, reveling in the triumph of **Chandrayaan-3**, its lunar mission. The jubilation persisted into August as the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) etched its name in history with a groundbreaking lunar landing on 23 August. With precision, Vikram Lander executed a 'soft landing' on the Moon's south pole, marking India as the inaugural and sole nation to accomplish this remarkable feat.

at the Bharat Mandapam. The summit achieved milestones, including granting the African Union (AU) permanent G20 membership. The New Delhi Leaders Summit Declaration urged conflict avoidance, and the New Delhi Declaration emphasised upholding international law principles and advocating peaceful conflict resolution through diplomacy.

November 2023 carved its place in history with a monumental **rescue mission in Uttarakhand**. After over 400 gruelling hours, rescuers successfully reached 41 workers trapped in a collapsed tunnel. The operation tested resolve and perseverance, facing set-

capacity to house 888 parliamentarians in the Lok Sabha and 300 in the Rajya Sabha, marking a substantial increase from the previous capacities of 543 and 250.

In the legal saga, Chief Justice DY Chandrachud-led **Supreme Court upheld the central government's Article 370 abrogation**. The court mandated Jammu and



breaking twist in the

placed. The world bore witness to a tragic loss on 18 June when the **Titan submersible, operated by OceanGate, disappeared** near Newfoundland, Canada. Carrying five individuals on an exploration mission to the Titanic shipwreck site, the submersible experienced a catastrophic implosion 1 hour and 45 minutes into its descent. After a four-day search, the US Coast Guard confirmed the devastating news of all five passengers' demise. Among the lost were British billionaire Hamish Harding, Pakistani-born businessman Shahzada Dawood and his son Suleman, French explorer Paul-Henri Nargeolet, and OceanGate Expeditions' founder Stockton Rush. The remnants of the submersible were found on the seafloor, a

role as Chandler in the American sitcom Friends; Michael Gambon, acclaimed for portraying Dumbledore in later Harry Potter films; Tina Turner, often hailed as the Queen of Rock 'n' Roll; Sylvester da Cunha, the creative mind behind Amul's iconic 'Utterly Butterly' ads, and numerous other luminaries.

The canvas of 2023 painted a mosaic of victories and sorrows, reminding us of the fragility and resilience woven into the fabric of time. As we welcome the new year, may it bring hope, healing and the fortitude to face the unknown with grace. Here's to a 2024 filled with growth, compassion and the unfaltering spirit to navigate whatever melodies the coming days may compose. *Happy New Year!*

the Hinduja Group; Bollywood actor Satish Kaushik; Matthew Perry, renowned for his

role as Chandler in the American sitcom Friends; Michael Gambon, acclaimed for portraying Dumbledore in later Harry Potter films; Tina Turner, often hailed as the Queen of Rock 'n' Roll; Sylvester da Cunha, the creative mind behind Amul's iconic 'Utterly Butterly' ads, and numerous other luminaries.

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The Statesman  
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Economic compass

As the first rays of 2024 paint the Indian horizon with hues of anticipation, the economic canvas reveals a blend of promise and complexity. Recent growth figures, showcasing a robust 7.6 per cent surge in the third quarter of 2023, cast a radiant glow akin to the dawn of a new year. Yet, within the celebratory dance of numbers, a nuanced narrative unfolds ~ a tale that resonates with the insights of economists Raghuram Rajan and Rohit Lamba outlined in a book they've co-authored. In the symphony of economic metrics, a distinctive melody emerges ~ a call to reconsider the well-trodden path of manufacturing. Rajan and Lamba, crafting their economic composition, advocate for a departure from the traditional allure of factories and assembly lines. Once seen as the beacon of prosperity in East Asia, manufacturing now faces challenges of diminishing returns and heightened automation, prompting a re-evaluation of India's economic strengths. Manufacturing, once the linchpin of economic growth, has become an intensely competitive arena, with other countries seizing the mantle. East Asia's growth miracle in the 1960s propelled nations like China and South Korea to economic heights, but as the authors argue, the landscape has shifted. The profitability of manufacturing has dwindled, and the prevalence of automation has led to a reduction in available jobs. The success stories of global giants like Apple underscore this shift. While the design and distribution of products yield substantial value, actual manufacturing contributes comparatively less. This paradigm shift makes the case for India to reconsider the manufacturing-centric approach that served its East Asian counterparts.

The subsequent movement in this economic sonata directs our attention to the realm of services ~ a domain reshaped by modern technology and the omnipresence of the internet. India's IT sector stands as a resounding success, yet the authors illuminate the need for profound reforms. Education, the cornerstone for navigating the complexities of the global value chain, beckons for increased investment beyond the current 3-4 per cent of GDP. Rajan and Lamba unveil a palette of challenges, including high dropout rates and a significant gap in job readiness among graduates, underscoring the necessity for transformative changes. The final crescendo of this economic symphony echoes with the call for liberalism ~ both economic and political. A plea to shed protectionist tendencies, embrace open markets, and devolve power for effective governance permeates the narrative.

However, the authors inject a note of realism, questioning the political feasibility of such reforms in the current landscape. The delicate dance between economic liberalism and political control emerges as a nuanced waltz that India must master in navigating the trajectory of its growth story. In the unfolding narrative, there lies not merely a reflection on the economic currents of the past year but a compass guiding the path of the one ahead. The dawn of 2024 signifies more than the turning of a calendar page ~ it marks an opportune moment for India to recalibrate its economic compass.

Spirit of democracy

In the grand tapestry of global politics, 2024 emerges as a pivotal year, where the heartbeat of democracy resonates across borders. A staggering 50 countries, boasting over 2 billion voters collectively, are set to navigate the labyrinth of elections, each with its unique narrative, challenges, and promises. The sheer magnitude of this democratic spectacle underscores the kaleidoscope of possibilities, with each ballot casting a ripple that could reverberate far beyond national borders. At the forefront is the United States, an undeniable linchpin in global affairs.

Its presidential race, slated for November 5, is nothing short of a seismic event. The world watches, breath held, as the nation grapples with its own identity, debating the return of a familiar face or the continuity of its current trajectory. India, the world's largest democracy, is gearing up for an election of monumental proportions, expected between April and May. With a staggering 900 million voters, the fate of Prime Minister Narendra Modi hangs in the balance. The outcome here is more than just a domestic affair. It reverberates globally, as India, an increasingly vital geopolitical player, stands at a crossroads that could shape regional dynamics for years to come. Mexico, too, stands at the cusp of a historic shift. The possibility of electing its first woman President, challenging traditional norms, marks a profound moment in the nation's political evolution. A country historically steeped in machismo confronts a potential paradigm shift, signalling broader societal changes and progress. As we traverse the globe, elections to the European Parliament in June underscore the interconnectedness of our world. More than 400 million voters across 27 member countries participate in what is deemed the world's largest transnational election. The implications of this collective voice extend beyond the continent, painting a vivid picture of the evolving landscape of international cooperation and solidarity. In South Africa, an election of paramount importance unfolds against a backdrop of historical significance. The African National Congress (ANC), which has governed since the end of apartheid, faces an uncertain future. The potential for a coalition government hints at a shifting political landscape, challenging the status quo in a nation that has undergone profound transformation. The nuances of each election, from Russia to Taiwan, Iran to Pakistan, weave a rich narrative of democracy in action. The interconnectedness of economies, policies, and global stability means that the outcomes of these seemingly isolated elections have the potential to create a domino effect, shaping the course of our shared future. As we stand on the precipice of this electoral deluge, it is imperative to recognise the weight of each vote, the stories woven into the fabric of these democratic exercises. The year that has just begun is not merely a year of elections. It is a collective journey, a testament to the enduring spirit of democracy that binds us all.

Rights in Retreat

The record of NHRC and SHRCs vis-à-vis enforcement of fundamental rights does not inspire much confidence. Annual Reports of the NHRC are not publicly available after 2018-19; looking at the latest monthly statistics one finds that there is a huge backlog of cases in crucial spheres e.g., during the month of November 2023, out of 10 cases of deaths in police custody, investigations in only two cases were completed, leaving a backlog of 285 cases. Similarly, 12 deaths in police encounters were reported, out of which one was investigated, leaving a pendency of 252 cases



‘Human rights’ is probably the most abused phrase in the international political lexicon. The US, which is mindful of human rights violations in places as far afield as India, China and Venezuela, keeps mum when small children die on its border with Mexico or when the Israeli Army kills more than 20,000 civilians in Gaza, with active US support. Sadly, such hypocrisy is the hallmark of most of the Western world.

The United Nations has defined human rights as rights that all humans have, simply because they exist as human beings ~ such rights are not granted by any State or other agency. Human rights are inherent to all human beings, regardless of nationality, sex, ethnic origin, colour, religion, language, or any other status. They range from the most fundamental ~ the right to life ~ to those that make life worth living, such as the rights to food, education, work, health, and liberty. Adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), by the United Nations General Assembly, in 1948, has made protection of human rights a universal obligation. UDHR has been reinforced by two covenants ~ the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights ~ which, taken together are called the International Bill of Rights.

These covenants enjoin all States to recognise human rights as inalienable, indivisible and interdependent. Under international law, these conventions cast an obligation upon all States to respect, protect and fulfil human rights. The UNGA has created the Human Rights Council as the key UN inter-governmental body responsible for protection of human rights. The Human Rights Council reports directly to the UNGA, and is mandated to address situations of human rights violations, and respond to human rights emergencies.

The most innovative feature of the Human Rights Council is the Universal Periodic Review. This unique mechanism involves a review of the human rights records of all 193 UN member states, once every four years. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), serves as the secretariat for the Human Rights Council. The High Commissioner for Human Rights exercises principal responsibility for UN human rights activities. The High Com-

missioner is mandated to respond to serious violations of human rights, and to undertake preventive action. Individuals, whose rights have been violated can file complaints directly to Committees overseeing human rights treaties.

Almost all countries have incorporated human rights in their local laws. Chapter three of the Indian Constitution defines the six Fundamental Rights, viz. the right to equality, right to freedom, right against exploitation, right to freedom of religion, cultural and educational rights, and right to constitutional remedies.

No law can be enacted to take away or abridge a fundamental right, and all laws are void to the extent they impinge on a fundamental right. In addition to the Courts, we also have the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), set up under the Protection of Human Rights Act 1993. The Commission enquires into complaints of violation of human rights or negligence in the prevention of such violation by a public servant. NHRC is headed by a Chairperson, ordinarily a former Chief Justice of India. The Paris Principles of the UN which the NHRC is required to follow are: Mandate and competence, Autonomy from Government, Independence guaranteed by a Statute or Constitution, Pluralism, Adequate resources; and adequate powers of investigation. Mirroring the NHRC all States have State Human Rights Commissions (SHRCs).

However, the record of NHRC and SHRCs vis-à-vis enforcement of fundamental rights does not inspire much confidence. Annual Reports of the NHRC are not publicly available after 2018-19; looking at the latest monthly statistics one finds that there is a huge backlog of cases in crucial spheres e.g., during the month of November 2023, out of 10 cases of deaths in police custody, investigations in only two cases were completed, leaving a backlog of 285 cases. Similarly, 12 deaths in police encounters were reported, out of which one was investigated, leaving a pendency of 252 cases. One doesn't often hear about some pro-active action by NHRC, a glaring example is its complete silence in the ethnic strife in Manipur.

The principal violator of human rights is the police, since the only method of crime detection known to inadequately trained policemen is to beat suspects, or related persons, to extract a 'confession.'

Generally, such 'confessions' fall apart in court due to paucity of corroboratory evidence leading to allegations of soft-peddalling against the judiciary. One can only draw consolation that police forces of most countries have a similar, blemished track record; police in the US is notorious for gunning down/beating to death innocent blacks who fall in their clutches.

The US State Department, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, European Union and Freedom House have all castigated India's human rights performance, pointing to the existence and mindless implementation of draconian legislation like the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act and the Armed Forces

(Special Powers) Act. The US Commission on International Freedom has alleged that the Indian Government had "promoted Hindu nationalist policies resulting in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom" asking the US State Department to name India as a "country of particular concern." However, the Government of India has denied all such allegations.

India has a liberal constitution, a free press and also, anomalously, a bureaucracy and police that enforce the law with a colonial mindset. Add to it, a thin-skinned ruling class which believes in the medieval principle of lèse-majesté, equating opposing political views and political satire to treason, and you have a situation where dissent is criminalised. This provides sufficient ammunition to international human right activists to show India in a poor light.

This is not to whitewash the dismal record of our enforcement agencies who believe that killing or maiming criminals will eliminate crime. Replying to a question in Parliament, the Minister of State for Home Affairs stated that there had been 655 encounter killings, between 1 January 2017, and 31 January 2022.

The states with the worst records were Chhattisgarh with 191 killings, Uttar Pradesh with 117, Assam with 50, Jharkhand

with 49, Odisha with 36, Jammu and Kashmir with 35, and Maharashtra with 26.

The most notorious cases included the death of gangster Vikas Dubey and five of his accomplices in separate encounters in 2020. Controversy also surrounds the shooting of Atiq Ahmed and his brother Ashraf, in the presence of a large posse of policemen. Atiq's son, Asad, had been killed in an encounter a few days earlier. After the killing of Atiq and Ashraf, the UP Chief Minister declared that "no mafia will spread terror in UP today" and "those who were a threat are now under threat themselves."

Very recently, after an ambush in J&K, in which four jawans were killed, fifteen villagers were rounded up; three were tortured to death, and the rest had to be hospitalised with grievous injuries. Acknowledging State culpability, the J&K Government ordered monetary compensation and promised a job to a relative, but said no word about action against the perpetrators. Such impunity is fatal for our claim of being a country observing the rule of law.

There are many reasons for the poor human rights record of our enforcement agencies; the first being the politician-criminal nexus brought out in the NN Vohra Committee Report (1993), the second being endlessly prolonged trials that have eroded public trust in the criminal justice system, which makes instant retributive justice acceptable to the public, and the third being lack of the knowledge of modern investigative methods that makes the police commit human rights violations.

Obviously, systemic reforms are needed to better our human rights record ~ which may not be possible in the short run.

The bottom line is that we can ignore human rights violations at our own risk. As Bertolt Brecht, the theatre practitioner, playwright, and poet had said: "First of all, they came to take the gypsies and I was happy because they pilfered. Then they came to take the Jews and I said nothing, because they were unpleasant to me. Then they came to take homosexuals, and I was relieved, because they were annoying me. Then they came to take the Communists, and I said nothing because I was not a Communist. One day they came to take me, and there was nobody left to protest."

A MEMBER OF THE ANN ASIA NEWS NETWORK

ASIAN VOICES  
The silencing of New Year's eve

The New Year's Eve of my childhood was a noisy, smoke-filled affair. From dusk throughout the festive night, there would be explosions in and around my grandparents' house in San Pablo City, culminating in an hour-long, nonstop explosion of firecrackers from all the corners of the city to welcome the arrival of a new year. I was an active participant of those celebrations. My cousins and I would spend our allowances to buy various firecrackers, which could be bought in practically every street corner, and had colorful, evocative names.

There were the triangular ones, and I could still recall their names according to increasing size: "two star," "three star," "five star," "thunder lolo," "super lolo," "pla-pla." There was also "bawang" wrapped in some kind of fiber, the snaking "sawa" with hundreds of rounds, and our usual "finale" before midnight: a giant "whistle bomb." Of course, there were also the fireworks: the handheld "luces," the silver and gold "fountains," the rotating "trompillos," the skyrocketing "kwitits."

Today, New Year is literally a toned-down affair in growing parts of the country. Even without statistics from the Department of Health (DOH) that reveal declining firecracker-related incidents, the silence speaks volumes; what used to be a weeks-long season of "papatok" has now been reduced to just a few days, if at all, and at least where I live in



Laguna, it is only during the final hours of the year that you will hear the sound of firecrackers. First, the government and various sectors deserve credit for all their anti-firecracker campaigns, which has run for decades and intensified in the past several years. Known for his firecrackers ban as mayor of Davao City, former president Rodrigo Duterte passed Executive Order No. 28 s. 2017 which restricted firecracker use, and today there are renewed calls for a total nationwide ban.

But even without such laws, firecracker use has been declining for sociological reasons; just like "patintero" and "siatô," firecrackers have given way to indoor, virtual forms of entertainment from mobile games to TikTok, especially in urban areas but increasingly elsewhere. Surely, the pandemic only hastened this decades-long trend, just as surely, economic considerations has also played a role in many families' decisions (not) to buy firecrackers and fireworks. Third, the centralization and mass-mediatization of New Year celebrations have diminished the family- and community-based pyrotechnics, as more people participate in New Year's Eve countdowns in urban areas and through television. With a myriad of celebrities, ever-grander display of fireworks (and nowadays drones, too), alongside other forms of entertainment, these spectacular countdowns offer everyone a kind of revelry that is difficult to match by one's own means. Can changing weather patterns also be partly responsible for the dampened enthusiasm for firecrackers and fireworks? It may well just be my hazy memory but the Decembers of my childhood seemed drier and colder, and the DOH has also noted the rainy weather in the past, welcoming how it can discourage people to use firecrackers. The tradition of New Year firecrackers comes from the Chinese, who invented gunpowder; the fireworks are intended to drive away evil spirits and bad luck, and thus usher in a prosperous new year. But as traditions go, people who participate in them do not necessarily think of the practice itself in that way; and do it for their own reasons. When we were kids, we just thought it was a fun and exciting activity.

IN MEMORIAM

SEAL AMAR KUMAR — No matter where you go, you will always be in our hearts. — Ila & Bhaskar.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

editor@thestatesman.com

Unequal

SIR, The comment made by a judge of the Gujarat High Court that a rape is a rape even if it is perpetrated by the husband on his wife is a step forward in recognising marital rape as a crime.

In Indian law, there is an exception which gives immunity to a husband from the charge of rape, except when the wife is below 18 years of age.

The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, which has just been passed by parliament, and which

the government claims has 'decolonised' Indian law, retains this exception.

It is difficult to see how this

provision reconciles with the right to equality of women. The new laws are claimed to give priority to crimes against women

but they still follow the patriarchal notion that men have absolute power, including sexual power, over women.





# Saying Happy Birthday on New Year's Day

ATANU BISWAS

One of my acquaintances, who also happens to be a statistics professor, was shocked to see that 34 of his nearly 3,000 Facebook friends – or a startling 1 out of 87 – were born on January 1. He wondered, “Probability theory fails!” But is it actually the case? Maybe not. Perhaps because it’s the default birth date for those who are unsure or choose not to disclose the precise day. Actually, I also looked through my friend list on Facebook. The number of January 1 birthdays is also disproportionately high there. I’m quite sure that this might happen to many readers as well.

Many people should have birthdays on January 1, the first day of the year in the Gregorian calendar. Satyendra Nath Bose, Vidya Balan, Asrani, Nana Patekar and Jyotidatya Scindia are among the Indian celebrities – past and present – who could celebrate their birthdays and the New Year together. Apparently, there’s nothing special about a January 1 birthday, though. If we assume that births occur at a constant rate throughout the year, which the above-mentioned acquaintance of mine assumed, perhaps, then one in every 365 (or one in 365.25, to be more precise) people should be born on January 1. That represents almost 0.27 per cent of the population.

January 1 is only a point in the infinite hoop rolling of time as the earth revolves around the sun and on its axis; it cannot be the start or the finish of the earth’s one elliptical revolution. However, January 1 is significant because it was the first day of the year when Julius Caesar changed the calendar, in part to celebrate Janus, the Roman god of beginnings, whose two faces gave him the ability to see both the past and the future. However, as Pope Gregory modified the Julian calendar and established January 1 as the first day of a new year, it gradually gained acceptance throughout Europe and beyond.

There are many other platforms where users can designate January 1



as their “default” birthday. Because of such “default” logic, there are some villages in India where, as per Aadhaar data, all the inhabitants were born on January 1. According to a media report, Kakra village in Shivpuri district of Madhya Pradesh is one where the majority of villagers lack any documentation proving their age. Therefore, the authorities in charge of enrolling Aadhaar applicants provided them with the identical birth month and date. Likewise, January 1 is the birthday of the majority of people who live in Kanjasa village in the Jasra block of Gurgur, Allahabad. Reports state that almost every resident of Gaiindi Khata village of Van Gujjars in Haridwar had the same birthdate on their Aadhaar cards.

In a press release, the UIDAI stated that as per its enrolment policy, where a person doesn’t know the exact date of birth and doesn’t have a supporting document for the same, the UIDAI accepts the declared birth year or age, and January 1 of that year is considered the person’s date of birth for the purpose of Aadhaar enrollment.

But this is not exclusive to India. The birthday of thousands of immigrants and refugees around the world is New Year’s Day. January 1 is picked by default since many of them don’t have access to their birth certificates and because some of them fled some sort of calamity in a region of the world where birthdays aren’t as significant. A few years ago, a Business Insider piece referred to US immigration data from 2009, indicating that 11,000 out of the almost 80,000 refugees who entered the country that year had January 1 as their birthdate. Even if you don’t assume a uniform distribution of births throughout the year, that still represents an improbably high 14 per cent. Since they lack official birth certificates, these migrants are frequently instructed to put down January 1 as their date of birth when they arrive in the US seeking asylum. The January 1 birthday is so popular among newcomers that, at the stroke of midnight, immigrant children wish their parents a Happy Birthday in addition to wishing them a Happy New Year!

Australia, too, experiences the

same thing. In the past, people in Australia who lacked proof of their date of birth were assigned a date, with many being forced to use the first day of the year. Following a change in regulation in 2011, December 31 was designated as the official birthday of individuals in Australia. Australians of the Stolen Generation rarely possessed official documentation, but when they did, their birthdate was July 1 instead of January 1.

However, in general, one might wonder if a January 1 birthday is just as likely to occur on other dates. Clearly, the answer is “no” in many societies. In fact, they are far less likely, for reasons some of which are well understood. In fact, New Year’s Day is really one of the least popular birthdays for native-born Americans, despite the fact that January 1 is an incredibly common birthday for immigrants. After analysing birth data from 1994 to 2014 in the US, the esteemed polling organisation FiveThirtyEight placed January 1 as the 365th day out of 366, surpassing only Christmas Day. They cited a variety of factors to account for the

popularity or unpopularity of specific dates, such as parents going into labour early to avoid hospital holidays, Leap Day, or even Friday the 13th.

Similarly, in some other countries, like Australia, January 1 may rank among the least popular days to be born. First of all, hardly any people appear to find giving birth a pleasant way to spend a vacation. It’s likely that doctors would also rather unwind during the holidays than do baby deliveries. Christmas Day, Boxing Day (December 26), New Year’s Day, Australia Day (January 26), and Anzac Day (April 25) are the five least popular dates for births in Australia, for example.

Nonetheless, there may be several ways in which society reflects the custom of using January 1 as the “default” or cut-off date for a variety of activities. Malcolm Gladwell, for instance, noted in his 2008 book “Outliers: The Story of Success” that a disproportionate number of professional hockey players in Canada are born in the early months of the year. The rationale for this is that because youth hockey leagues base their eligibility on the calendar year, they designate January 1 as the cut-off. As a result, kids born on January 1 participate in the same league as kids born on December 31 of the same calendar year. And at that early age, children born in January or February, for example, are considered better athletes and are obviously more physically mature than their younger counterparts, who are born in the later part of the year. As a result, they receive extra coaching and have a higher likelihood of being selected for elite hockey leagues. This kind of situation holds true in many other countries and circumstances. Therefore, the “default” cut-off date, whatever that is, might have a significant imprint on society.

Regardless, I wish every reader a Happy New Year. And to everyone having a January 1st birthday, Happy Birthday too!

(The writer is Professor of Statistics, Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata.)

IT CAME TO MIND | MANISH NANDY

## A brand-new beginning

The most important thing about a new year is that it is new. It is a chance for renewal. Whatever we could not do earlier, we can do in the year ahead. What we did wrong, we can try again and make it right. The new year brings a provision of correction, a promise of redemption and hope. That is what a new year means.

"We trivialize that meaning," said Leon, my new neighbor and friend, "when for the new year we buy a new shirt or a new shovel. The stakes are much higher. We have the chance to change the most important things in our life."

"I understand that," I said, "but the problem is to know what is important. If I know I don't have enough shirts, it is simple to buy a new shirt. If I want to do something bigger, I may consider buying a new car. How to decide what is more important than shirts or cars?"

Leon looked quizzically at me and asked, "If your house is suddenly on fire, what would you run to take out first?"

I pondered, "I live alone, and the things that come to mind are some pictures of my daughters and the computers that have all my writing."

"That gives a clue to what is important to you: your children and your writing. Think of it another way. Scientists study birds, insects and animals by watching their behavior. Look



Illustration by : Debabrata Chakrabarty

at your own behaviour. If you want, keep records. Given a choice, what do you spend your time on? What do you love to do, where you devote most of your time and energy?"

That made me ponder more. I have the vaguest notion of where my time goes in a week. Whatever work I do, I always want to know the facts first before I attempt any analysis. Yet of my own life, I have the scantiest data.

Lamely, I told Leon that I thought he had a point and I intended to do a better job of tracking my lifestyle. I could not improve that style without first knowing what kind of a lifestyle I was pursuing instinctively day after day.

"When you gather some information on how you are actually living, what in effect are your priorities, you might like to ask yourself some key questions," said Leon. "Most people

find that they are giving too much time to what they themselves think is trivial. So much of their time goes to handling 'urgent' things that they have no time left to handle 'important' things. They are too busy with the daily grind to be able to attend to the two or three critical things that can make the biggest difference to their life in the next few years."

Don't I know this! I have seen this with myself – as I have seen it with smart and talented friends – we are frantic solving everyday problems and have not a moment left to consider vital changes. We are doing so many things to impress the boss or please the girlfriend, there is no breathing time left to contemplate changing the job itself or living a life that the girlfriend doesn't care for – but you do, you desperately do.

Leon smiled indulgently. He added, "You and I are not the only persons who get confused about which way to change in the new year. Check out the people you know. Most change because they are forced to change. Because they have lost a job or lost an arm – or won a lottery. But there are a few who change because they intend to."

"Why?"

"They change for a life that makes more sense, at least to them. Haven't you heard of stockbrokers who became musicians or rich doctors who chose to be poor school teach-

ers? It doesn't make sense to their colleagues or neighbors. But it means everything to them. They stick to their new lives whatever the hardship."

Leon lives alone. He got up to make tea for us both.

As he handed me a cup, I could smell the welcome fragrance of the Darjeeling tea. He said, "Did you know that I was an investment banker in LA before I came here? I became a digital artist only after I moved last year. I am struggling but I am happy."

It was a quiet Monday afternoon, only a day after the first day of a new year. It seemed auspicious to hear of a man's new-found happiness. A new year of course means a new beginning, a fresh and refreshing start. Like the Jewish chant of Kol Nidrei, the central prayer of Yom Kippur, a hopeful chance of review and renewal. Whatever be our misfortune, as the joyful bells toll, we lift our hearts and sing with the cantor that all our old restrictions, our fragile vows, are "absolved, remitted, cancelled, declared void and not in force." We are free to make new vows, however quixotic, however over-ambitious. We can dream anew, take brave new directions.

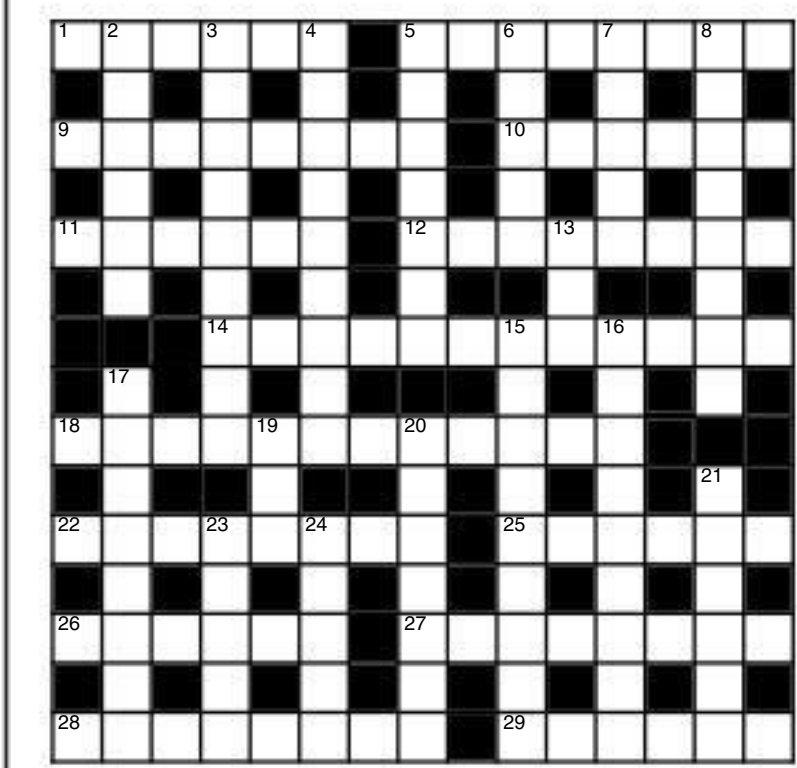
Like a million other erring souls and you, I will live in that hope.

(The writer is a US-based international development advisor and had worked with the World Bank. He can be reached at mmandy@gmail.com)



CROSSWORD

NO-292651



### YESTERDAY'S SOLUTION

TOPPING RIBCAGE  
H L N I U R S G  
WEALD RELOADING  
A T I A E I D H  
CONTAINER NIECE  
K S D S A  
STORM OUTSTARED  
N E L H E E  
NIGHTGEAR MOPUP  
O R E N R T  
TEMPO CREATION  
I O N R S O S T  
CARBONADO RAITIA  
E A M F M T N I  
DULLEST EVANGEL

### ACROSS

- Award most of money before rift (6)
- Fond of an upset occasionally (2,3,3)
- Inept sot struggling to go faster (4,2,2)
- Type of film showing end of panic after months in space (6)
- Left-leaning plot against Republican is in ruins (6)
- Somewhat powerless to embrace retreat in an enthusiastic manner (8)

### DOWN

- Detect hint of micronutrient (5,7)
- Starts with places producing protective coverings (7,5)
- Vital energy associated with girl band for instance (8)
- Henry to broadcast with Rob and Bob possibly (6)
- Tomorrow's article filled with spiritual nourishment? Just the opposite (6)
- Roomy and deceptively attractive with area for a bit of exercise (8)

- Affected by onset of nerves after hoax in the London area (8)
- Item of clothing hard to obtain close to Christmas (6)
- Treacherous revolutionary initially escaping capture in retreat (6)
- Soldier quick to learn about unserviceable gear (9)
- Greeting round of applause with a wave (9)

- Not in time to protect king from violent injury (7)
- Biting Bill to get free (5)
- Doctor involved in study of genius (5)
- Silly to pay Heather (8)
- Old English flower (3)
- Become discouraged as Larwood would if wicketless (4,5)
- Largely avoid imparting a feeling of doubt (9)

- Changed planes at Nice (8)
- Essential to list each kind of shrub (5)
- Last of victims well hidden by murderer in watertight chamber (7)
- Slightly alter poster before fair (6)
- Form of Arabic art originally covered by Irish TV show (5)
- Caught with order for crystal-meth (5)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required. (By arrangement with The Independent, London)

100 YEARS AGO

### OCCASIONAL NOTE

It will be remembered that a sensation was caused recently in "rugger" circles, especially in Wales, by the announcement made by the Scottish authorities that unless Neil Macpherson returned a present which he had received, in common with the other members of the team, to commemorate Newport's unbeaten record last season, his claims to being selected to play for Scotland in future would not be considered. As the presentation had been sanctioned by the Welsh Union, the attitude of the Scottish Union created a very delicate situation, more especially as it implied that, in the event of the intimation being ignored, it would lead to an estrangement between the two Unions. Further complications would ensue from any quarrel of this description, for it would put an embargo on Scottish players in English clubs playing against those affiliated to the Welsh Union. It will be recalled that a similar breach actually did take place when Arthur Gould, the famous three-quarter, accepted a presentation. The result was to prevent the Scotland v. Wales match in the year 1897 and 1898. The question also arises as to what the English and Irish Unions intend doing as regards the internationals, R. Edwards and Dr. Roche, both of whom play for Newport. As the Scottish Union will probably stick to their request that the presents should be returned, the danger of a breach between the Unions is still very great.

NEWS ITEMS

## COMMUNAL RIOT AT HOWRAH

Communal feeling has been deeply stirred in Calcutta and other parts of Bengal as a result of the Swaraj Party's Hindu-Moslem Pact, and, although not directly attributable to the Pact controversy, a serious riot, resulting in the death of one Hindu and extensive injuries to five others took place at Howrah on Sunday. For some time, it appears, relations between the two communities have been strained - a circumstance which the Pact dispute did not ease - on account of a legal action regarding some land adjoining the Pheelkhana mosque. The Hindu landlord leased this plot of land to another Hindu, but this was objected to by the Mahomedan residents who did not like a Hindu bustee being erected so close to their mosque fearing it might lead to trouble during the Bakr-Id festival.

## HORSE SHOW AT TOLLYGUNGE

His Excellency the Governor, Her Excellency the Countess of Lytton and Lady Hermione Lytton together with a large gathering of well known personalities including His Excellency the Commander-in-Chief and Lady Rawlinson were present at the annual horse show held at Tollygunge yesterday under the auspices of the Tollygunge Club. This year the show - one of the most important outdoor social functions of the Christmas and New Year holidays in Calcutta - was notable for its specially large entry - 177 all told against last year's fine total of 163 - and the excellent display of English and Colonial polo ponies which were led by Mr. Kenneth Campbell's nicely-built champion pony, Macpherson. Ladies' hacks were also outstanding for numbers, while the quality was substantially over the average.

## IRELAND'S ARMY

The Irish Free State is rapidly converting its army to a peace footing. The Minister of Finance has decided that expenditure upon it must be limited to pound 4,000,000, and it is now announced that the standing army will consist of about 20,000 men, which is less than two-thirds of the quota agreed upon by the Anglo-Irish Treaty. The heavy demobilisations which have taken place, combined with the release of over 10,000 prisoners are likely to put a severe strain on the Labour market, but this will be met to some extent by the proposal of the Free State Parliament to spend pound 2,000,000 on emergency works. Many men will be absorbed in rebuilding the area of Dublin which was devastated in the troublesome period three years ago.

## BLOOD TRANSFUSION

Great interest is being taken in Sir Almroth Wright's principle of the so-called "immune-transfusion of blood" to cure septicemia, which is being increasingly used with great success in London hospitals. A medical correspondent of the Daily News, explaining this new method of blood transfusion, says that various kinds of protective serum, which have long been employed for injection into patients with serious infectious disease, are prepared by injecting animals with an infected organism and waiting until an animal has successfully overcome infection. Only the blood serum of this animal can be used; not the whole blood which is at once dissolved if injected into man, since animal blood cells are attacked like any other foreign body. Hence the use of transfusion after serious loss of blood.



THUMBNAILS

India's forex reserves rose by \$58 billion cumulatively in 2023: India's foreign exchange reserves increased by USD 4.471 billion to \$ 620.441 billion in the week ending December 22, 2023, hitting a 21-month high, the latest data released by the Reserve Bank of India showed. In the calendar year 2023, the RBI added about \$ 58 billion to its foreign exchange kitty. Last week, India's foreign currency assets (FCA), the biggest component of the forex reserves, rose \$4.698 billion to \$549.747 billion, the central bank's weekly statistical data showed. In 2022, India's forex kitty slumped \$71 billion cumulatively. Gold reserves during the week, however, declined by \$ 102 million to \$474.74 billion. Forex reserves, or foreign exchange reserves, are assets that are held by a nation's central bank or monetary authority.

'Mumbai achieves best in 11-year property sale registrations in 2023': Mumbai recorded the best in 11 years the total property sale registrations in 2023. This resulted in the best year since 2013 for property sales for this region surpassing last year's peak by 4 per cent, data compiled by real estate consultant Knight Frank India showed. In 2023, the Mumbai city area which falls under Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) jurisdiction, recorded total registrations of 127,139 real estate properties. According to Knight Frank India, the total value of stamp duty collected in 2023 was to the tune of Rs 10,889 crore, which was also a new 10-year high recording and a year-on-year growth of 22 per cent. Over 12,487 property registrations, contributing to Rs 952 crore to the state government revenues were recorded in December.

# Markets to have a tough time as new year unfolds

The broader markets saw BSE 100, BSE 200 and BSE 500 gain 1.86%, 1.97% and 1.98% respectively

AGENCIES

NEW DELHI, 31 DECEMBER

The week has come to an end and this week becomes special because the calendar year 2023 ends at the stroke of midnight as well. The week was a four-day affair with it beginning with a trading holiday on account of Christmas. Markets contrary to expectation gained on three of the four sessions and had a small dip on the very last day of the year. Nothing to be read into but purely coincidental.

The week saw BSE SENSEX gain 1,133.30 points or 1.59 per cent to close at 72,240.26 points while NIFTY gained 382.00 points or 1.79 per cent to close at 21,731.40 points. The broader markets saw BSE 100, BSE 200 and BSE 500 gain 1.86 per cent, 1.97 per cent and 1.98 per cent respectively. BSE MIDCAP was up 2.67 per cent while BSE SMALLCAP was up 1.60 per cent.

Dow Jones gained in three of the four sessions. It has had a great year and for calendar year 2023 gained 4,484.59 points or 13.53 per cent to close at 37,631.87 points.

In contrast, the Indian benchmark indices have had a great performance and have outperformed the Dow. On a yearly basis, BSE SENSEX gained 11,399.52 points or 18.74 per cent to close at 72,240.26 points.

Similarly, NIFTY gained 3,626.10 points or 20.03% to close at 21,731.40 points. For the week, the Dow was up 303.57 points or 0.81 per cent to close at 37,689.54 points. The rally last year in the markets has been skewed and the bulk of the rally happened in the last couple of



months. The rally in BSE SENSEX was 18.74 per cent of which 26.62 per cent was in the first 10 months and the balance 73.38 per cent in the remaining two months. In the case of NIFTY, the rally in the first 10 months was 26.85 per cent while it was 73.15 per cent in the remaining two months.

Coming to the last week of the calendar year, we saw December futures expire on a positive note. The series fared very well for the bulls and gained 1,645.55 points or 8.17 per cent to close at 21,778.70 points.

The week gone by was the week of new listings and as many as eight listings happened during the four trading sessions. There were three listings each on Tuesday and Wednesday followed by one on Thursday and Friday. There are no IPOs pending as of the date on the main board either to open or list.

The first to list was Moti-sons Jewellers Limited which had issued shares at Rs 55. The

discovered price on BSE on Tuesday was Rs 103.90 and at the end of the day, it closed at Rs 101.18, a gain of Rs 46.18 or 83.96 per cent. By the end of the week, the share had lost further ground and closed at Rs 95.89, a gain of Rs 40.89 or 74.35 per cent.

The second share to list was Muthoot Microfin Limited which had issued shares at Rs 291. The discovered price was Rs 278, a loss of Rs 13 or 4.46 per cent. Shares closed day one at Rs 266.20, a loss of Rs 24.80 or 8.52 per cent. By the end of the week, the share had slipped further to close at Rs 251.20, a loss of Rs 39.80 or 13.67 per cent.

The third share to list was Suraj Estate Developers Limited which had issued shares at Rs 360. The discovered price was Rs 343.80, a loss of Rs 16.20 or 4.5 per cent. The share closed day one at Rs 334.30, a loss of Rs 25.70 or 7.13 per cent. By the end of the week, the share lost further to close at Rs 330.60, a loss of Rs 29.40 or 8.17 per cent.

The fourth share to list was on Wednesday the 27th of December. Shares of Credo Brands Marketing Limited which were issued at Rs 280 listed at Rs 282, a gain of Rs 2 or 0.71 per cent. By the end of the day, they had gained further to close at Rs 312.50, a gain of Rs 32.50 or 11.60 per cent. By the end of the week, the share lost some ground and closed at Rs 292.40, a gain of Rs 12.40 or 4.43 per cent.

The fifth share to list was RBZ Jewellers Limited. The share debuted on day one at Rs 100 and closed at Rs 104.99. By the end of the week, the share had gained further and closed at Rs 115.74, a gain of Rs 15.74 or 15.74 per cent. The sixth share to list was Happy Forgings Limited which had issued shares at Rs 850. The discovered price was Rs 1001.25, a gain of Rs 151.25 or 17.79 per cent. By the end of the week, the share closed at Rs 1,029.10, a gain of Rs 179.10 or 21.07 per cent. The seventh share to list was from Azad Engineering Limited which

had issued shares at Rs 524. The discovered price was Rs 710, a gain of Rs 186 or 35.49 per cent. Share closed day one at Rs 677.10, a gain of Rs 153.10 or 29.21 per cent. Share closed the week at Rs 692.40, a gain of Rs 168.40 or 32.13 per cent.

The eighth and final share to list was Innova Cap Tab Limited which had issued shares at Rs 448. The discovered price was Rs 456.10, a gain of Rs 8.10 or 1.80 per cent. Share closed day one at Rs 545.15, a gain of Rs 97.15 or of 21.68 per cent. It appears that investors who do intraday trading in newly listed shares have gotten caught on the wrong foot in the Innova Cap Tab. Further, in some of the listings, the grey market premiums have just disappeared post the issue getting subscribed. Probably it's time to take a fresh look at grey market premiums and their reliability. Of the eight listings last week, two of them are trading at a discount to the issue price. Coming to the year, month and week ahead, expect markets to trade in a more circumspect manner. We have seen the best of the markets in the short term and one should expect that January would be a month of sideways movement and correction. There would be no budget on February 1 as this is the election year and there would be a vote on account to take care of government expenditure. The biggest driver for markets would be the quarterly corporate results for the October-December quarter which would begin in the second week of January. Market men are also hoping that FPI buying will continue.

## US dollar losing its dominance



AGENCIES

MOSCOW, 31 DECEMBER

The US dollar's share of global central bank reserves has continued to decrease, nosediving to 59.2 per cent in the third quarter of 2023, according to the latest data released by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The decline comes amid the de-dollarisation trend gaining momentum across the globe, RT reported.

IMF statistics show the greenback's share is down from roughly 70 per cent in 2000. The dollar remains the world's leading reserve currency with the euro coming second, while the latter's share has slid to 19.6 per cent. The Japanese yen's proportion of world reserves grew to 5.5 per cent from 5.3 per cent in the previous three-month period. The Chinese yuan, British pound, Canadian dollar and Swiss franc were little changed.

Meanwhile, according to data compiled by global financial messaging service SWIFT, the yuan's share of international payments hit a record high in November,

with the renminbi becoming the fourth most used currency worldwide. Cross-border yuan lending has risen as well, while the People's Bank of China holds over 30 bilateral currency swaps with foreign central banks, including Saudi Arabia and Argentina, RT reported.

The growing share of the yuan in cross-border transactions reflects China's trend of shifting away from the dollar, as well as Beijing's efforts to promote the use of the renminbi, according to SWIFT.

The global trend towards using national currencies in trade instead of the US dollar began to gain momentum last year, after Ukraine-related sanctions saw Russia cut off from the Western financial system and its foreign reserves frozen, RT reported.

The US dollar is on track for its worst year since 2020. The US dollar index, a measure of how the currency is performing against six other currencies, is down over 2 per cent for the year. The dollar has been weakened by the prospect of rate cuts next year, CNN reported.

## Ratings agencies cheer GDP surge buoyed by infra push, strong DPI

AGENCIES

NEW DELHI, 31 DECEMBER

India has emerged as the world's fastest growing economy amidst a worldwide economic slowdown and continues to be a bright spot going ahead with the IMF upgrading its growth forecast for the country twice this year.

India's GDP grew at an impressive 7.6% in the July-September quarter of the current financial year despite a slowdown in agriculture as the robust performance of the manufacturing sector and high government expenditure on big ticket infrastructure projects kept up the growth momentum.

The growth in the second quarter is a tad lower than the first quarter growth of 7.8% due to the erratic monsoon hitting the farm sector. India's GDP growth rate for the first half of 2023-24 now works out to 7.7%.

This has prompted the RBI to raise its growth forecast for India's economy to 7 per cent in 2023-24 from 6.5 per cent earlier. The GDP growth rate in the first three quarters of 2024-25 has been pegged at 6.7 per cent, 6.5 per cent and 6.4 per cent respectively.

The IMF raised its growth forecast for India in the current financial year to 6.3% after the data released by the sta-



tistics ministry on August 31 showed the Indian economy expanded by 7.8 per cent in April-June. At the same time the multilateral lending agency has cut its prediction for China's growth to 5%.

India's economic growth rate is expected to remain strong, supported by macroeconomic and financial stability, according to an IMF assessment report published on December 19.

"Going forward, the country's foundational digital public infrastructure and a strong government infrastructure program will continue to sustain growth," the report added.

It also states that India's current account deficit is expected to improve to 1.8 per cent of GDP in FY2023/24 as a result of resilient services exports and, to a lesser extent, lower oil import costs as crude oil prices have declined in the international market.

Amidst a challenging glob-

al macroeconomic environment, the Indian economy is exhibiting "a quickening growth momentum," with resilience and financial stability, according to the RBI's Financial Stability report released on December 28.

Bolstered by strong capital buffers and robust earnings, financial institutions are supporting durable credit growth. At the same time, higher profits and lower leverage are contributing to sound corporate financials, the report states.

The Indian economy and the domestic financial system remain resilient, supported by strong macroeconomic fundamentals, healthy balance sheets of financial institutions, moderating inflation, improving external sector position and continuing fiscal consolidation.

Proactive and prudent policy actions and availability of policy buffers are steering

the economy on a rising growth trajectory with stability, the RBI report adds.

At the same time the IMF's assessment report flags some risks to the outlook. A sharp global growth slowdown in the near term would affect India through trade and financial channels. Further global supply disruptions could cause recurrent commodity price volatility, increasing fiscal pressures for India, the report points out.

Domestically, weather shocks could reignite inflationary pressures and prompt further food export restrictions, the report states. This is a cause for concern as although headline inflation is expected to gradually decline to the target level it remains volatile due to food price shocks, it adds. This assumes importance as the agriculture sector posted a growth rate of a mere 1.2% in the July-Sept quarter compared to 3.5% in the previous quarter due to the freak weather marked by erratic and unseasonal rainfall that damaged crops.

Leading global investment bank Morgan Stanley is bullish on the country's future and sees this as "India's decade" with the nation's growth underpinned by the formation of a large urban middle class and a surge in manufacturing investment -- including by foreign multinationals -- as well

as infrastructure delivery in areas like power, transportation, and logistics.

This combination is ensuring that supply is moving ahead alongside growth in demand without driving a breakout in inflation, which has traditionally halted economic cycles in India.

The broad-based strengthening of India's economic activity that is under way will likely be sustained by easing input costs and higher corporate profits while inflation is expected to ease to 4.6 per cent in the first three quarters of 2024-25, according to the RBI's monthly bulletin released on December 20.

The fiscal position of the Centre and States has remained resilient. Major Central direct and indirect taxes such as income tax, corporation tax and goods and services tax (GST) recorded impressive growth in H1 2023-24. Expenditure on big infrastructure projects that push economic growth and creates jobs witnessed a robust rise. Finance Ministry data shows that net direct tax collections for the financial year 2023-24 have jumped by 20.66% to Rs. 13,70,388 crore as on December 17. Similarly, the monthly average GST receipts are now at ₹1.66 trillion, a notch above policy makers' initial estimate of ₹1.65 trillion.

## Drop in global prices a relief for oil import-dependent Indian economy

AGENCIES

NEW DELHI, 31 DECEMBER

The decline in global oil prices, despite the geopolitical uncertainty in West Asia, has come as a major shot in the arm for the Indian economy as the country imports over 85 per cent of its crude oil requirement.

Volatile oil prices pose a downside risk to the economy as costlier imports trigger an increase in domestic inflation and weaken the rupee as more US dollars are required to make import payments.

The price of the Indian basket of crude oil imports, which was moderating earlier, trended upwards during July-October 2023 after the OPEC+ oil cartel went in for production cuts. However, the economic slowdown worldwide has now led to a decline in demand causing prices to fall again.

The price of the Indian basket of crude imports averaged \$90.08 a barrel during October 2023 and \$93.54 per barrel during September 2023. Prices of the benchmark Brent crude in the international market are now down to \$77 a barrel while the Indian basket would be even lower.

In the current situation, while the geopolitical tensions sparked by the Israel-Hamas



war tend to push up oil prices, it is the softening demand that eventually results in bringing prices down.

The past experience has been that prices surged in March, 2022 as Russia's invasion of Ukraine upended global crude flows which caused prices to shoot past the \$139 a barrel mark.

However, prices came down sharply in the second half of the year as central banks hiked interest rates and stoked fears of recession which caused demand to crash.

Government's Chief Economic Advisor V. Anantha Nageswaran does not see oil prices as a major downside risk for the Indian economy in the next financial year (2024-25).

"The geopolitical situation and what is happening to cargo movement in the Red Sea are relevant factors. However, this is going to run into

the challenge of slowing demand. If prices rise, they will further cool down the economic activity," Nageswaran said in an interaction at State Bank of India's Banking and Economic Conclave in Mumbai last week.

"I do not think energy demand will necessarily become sufficient enough in the course of 2024 to see oil prices spike up," he added.

An oil price surge of 10 per cent from the baseline of \$85 per barrel could weaken domestic growth by 15 basis points and increase inflation by 30 basis points, according to economists.

Leading global investment bank Morgan Stanley estimates that every \$10 rise in oil prices pushes up India's inflation by 50 basis points, assuming the higher costs are passed on to consumers, and widens the current account deficit by 30 basis points.

## Economy to stay as 'star performer' with key indicators in its favour

AGENCIES

NEW DELHI, 31 DECEMBER

India continues to be a 'star performing' economy as against other emerging markets, as per a report by Axis Securities.

"We firmly believe that India is likely to continue its growth momentum in 2024 and remain the land of stability against the backdrop of a volatile global economy. The majority of the high-frequency indicators are trending upwards and the uptick from the pre-Covid levels is visible, indicating the resilience of the Indian economy," the report said.

On top of it, the macroeconomic scenario has changed in favour of the equity market in the last one month and multiple indica-

tors are now indicating a positive start for 2024.

It is also noteworthy that the US bond yields witnessed a correction of 110bps from its peak in the last one month, which is further supporting the rally. Overall, the country's macro set-up is positive, the report said.

The fundamentals of Indian corporates have improved significantly and so has the profitability across the board.

This can be seen in the cumulative and rolling net profit of the NSE 500 universe for the last four quarters (till Q2FY24), which crossed the Rs 12 lakh crore mark. Moreover, after a muted performance for several years, the ROE of the broader market is improving as well.

The bolstered balance sheet strength of corporate



India and the significantly enhanced health of the Indian banking system are additional positive factors. These elements are poised to facilitate Indian equities in achieving double-digit returns over the next two or three years, supported by robust double-digit earnings growth, it added.

Multiple events are lined up in 2024 and the market will

continue to closely monitor the developments around them. The key events are: 1) Interim Budget; 2) General Elections; 3) Expectation of US Fed rate cut around May-June 2024; 4) Full-year Budget around July 2024 after the formation of new government; 5) Expectations of interest rates cut by the RBI in sync with global rate cuts;

6) US elections in November 2024.

The above-mentioned events are expected to keep the Indian equity market volatile and it could respond in either direction based on the developments, the report said.

Kenneth Andrade, Founder-Director at Old Bridge Capital Management and CIO at Old Bridge Asset Management, said that a global rebalancing of trades works favourably for India, positioning the country to gain global market share across various industries.

Opportunities span a wide spectrum, with a particular focus on the large manufacturing footprint and the resilient services industry, both of which are globally competitive.

"However, as we look ahead to 2024, there are areas of caution. Excesses in the small and microcap space raise concerns, and there is an anticipation of volatility, especially in segments where valuations appear stiff. Despite these short-term challenges, the overarching trend seems to favour India, presenting a higher growth potential relative to peer countries in the region," the report said.

HDFC Securities said in a report that India's GDP growth will remain healthy at 6.8 per cent in FY24 and moderate to 6.3 per cent in FY25.

Domestic manufacturing to lead growth, rural growth to be supported from rural welfare schemes in the Budget and global headwinds will impact export-oriented sectors, it said.

## Govt banks on weather-resistant seeds to bolster agricultural output

AGENCIES

NEW DELHI, 31 DECEMBER

While climate change has emerged as a tough challenge for the farm sector, the government is banking on the resilience in Indian agriculture and introduction of new weather-resistant seeds to increase food production in the country.

Kharif production was hit due to the erratic monsoon marked by flooding in some states and drought in others. The growth rate of the farm sector slowed to 1.2 per cent in the July-Sept quarter giving rise to concern. The adverse impact spilled into the ongoing rabi season with initial estimates showing the total sown area declining by over 3 per cent with a below-normal monsoon

leading to moisture deficiency in the soil and decreased water storage in reservoirs. The acreage under wheat and pulses has declined by 3 per cent and 8 per cent respectively, which raised concerns over a fall in overall food production going ahead.

Senior officials point out that last year too, the country faced erratic weather conditions and yet could achieve a record food grain production of 329.68 million tonnes in the 2022-23 crop year (July-June) as per the final estimates of the Agriculture Ministry. While initial estimates showed that the area under wheat and pulses had declined this year, officials point out that this was due to the delay in paddy harvesting on account of the unseasonal rains in September.





WEATHER

CITY	MAXI(°C)	MINI(°C)	
SINGAPORE	28	25	R
HONG KONG	26	18	S
TOKYO	13	08	CL
LONDON	10	07	R
DUBAI	26	22	S
SAN FRANCISCO	14	08	H
NEW YORK	07	03	CL
MOSCOW	02	-12	H

S= sunny, CL= clear, H=hazy, R= rainy...

No end in sight to China's economic woes as it battles low spending, joblessness

AGENCIES  
NEW DELHI, 31 DECEMBER

The big bad news of the year for China was economic. The country's economy has struggled to recover from the impact of Covid-19 shut-downs, and long-running structural problems have become impossible to ignore. The economic data has been troubling all year, and it's not getting any better. Foreign investment has plummeted and capital outflows have grown sharply, said an article in Foreign Policy.

Meanwhile, although job numbers have somewhat recovered on paper, official figures are highly unreliable, and the picture on the ground is depressing. Youth unemployment in China has reached such highs that the government stopped publishing the statistic this year. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), based on Chinese official data, has predicted that China's GDP grew by more than 5 per cent this year this year, but it's unclear if that is anywhere near the truth, the article said. The outlook seems the worst for new graduates, who face the kind of bleak job market that young Americans did amid the 2009 financial crisis. Despondency about the value of education is spreading, with graduates comparing themselves to Kong Yiji, a failed scholar from a famous 1919 short story. Young Chinese aren't just "lying flat" by choice -- they are being crushed, it added. A driving factor in China's economic crisis is that people simply aren't spending -- a major problem given that boosting domestic consumption has been key to Chinese economic hopes for years.

# War on Hamas to go for many more months: Bibi

The number of Israeli soldiers killed in Gaza combat rose to 170



AGENCIES  
GAZA STRIP, 31 DECEMBER

Prime Minister Benjamin Bibi Netanyahu said Saturday that Israel's war on Hamas in Gaza will continue for "many more months," pushing back against persistent international cease-fire calls after mounting civilian deaths, hunger and mass displacement in the besieged enclave.

Netanyahu thanked the Biden administration for its continued backing, including approval for a new emergency weapons sale, the second this month, and prevention of a U.N. Security Council resolution seeking an immediate cease-fire. Israel argues that ending the war now would mean victory for Hamas, a stance shared by the Biden administration, which at the same time urged Israel to do more to avoid harm to Palestinian civilians.

In new fighting, Israeli warplanes struck the urban refugee camps of Nuseirat and Bureij in the center of the territory

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In new fighting, Israeli warplanes struck the urban refugee camps of Nuseirat and Bureij in the center of the territory

Saturday as ground forces pushed deeper into the southern city of Khan Younis.

The Health Ministry in Gaza said Saturday that more than 21,600 Palestinians have been killed in Israel's unprecedented air and ground offensive since the deadly Oct. 7 Hamas attack on southern Israel. The ministry, which does not distinguish between the deaths of civilians and combatants, said 165 Palestinians were killed over the past 24 hours. It has said about 70% of those killed have been women and children.

The number of Israeli soldiers killed in Gaza combat rose to 170, after the military announced two more deaths Saturday.

The war has displaced some 85% of Gaza's 2.3 million residents, sending swells of people seeking shelter in Israeli-designated safe areas that the military has nevertheless bombed. Palestinians are left with a sense that nowhere is safe in the tiny enclave.

With Israeli forces expanding their ground offensive this week, tens of thousands more Palestinians streamed into the already crowded city of

Rafah at the southernmost end of Gaza.

Thousands of tents and makeshift shacks have sprung up on Rafah's outskirts next to U.N. warehouses. Displaced people arrived in Rafah on foot or on trucks and carts piled high with mattresses. Those who did not find space in overwhelmed shelters pitched tents on roadsides.

"We don't have water. We don't have enough food," Nour Daher, a displaced woman, said Saturday from the sprawling tent camp. "The kids wake up in the morning wanting to eat, wanting to drink. It took us one hour to find water for them. We couldn't bring them flour. Even when we wanted to take them to toilets, it took us one hour to walk." In the Nuseirat camp, resident Mustafa Abu Wawee said a strike hit the home of one of his relatives, killing two people.

"The (Israeli) occupation is doing everything to force people to leave," he said over the phone while helping to search for four people missing under the rubble. "They want to break our spirit and will, but they will fail. We are here to stay."

# Russia launches drone strikes on Ukraine, says Belgorod attack 'won't go unpunished'



AGENCIES  
KYIV, 31 DECEMBER

Russia launched a fresh drone assault on Ukraine on Saturday night, after promising that strikes on the Russian border city of Belgorod earlier in the day "would not go unpunished".

The Ukrainian Air Force said Sunday that it had shot down 21 of 49 drones launched by Russian forces overnight.

Twenty-eight people were wounded in an attack on the eastern city of Kharkiv, regional Gov. Oleh Syniuhov said Sunday. A central hotel, apartment buildings, kindergarten, shops and administrative buildings sustained damage, according to the regional

prosecutor's office.

Russia's Defense Ministry said that it had hit "decision-making centers and military facilities" in Kharkiv, reporting that its strike on the Kharkiv Palace Hotel had "destroyed representatives of the Main Intelligence Directorate and Ukrainian Armed Forces" involved in the "terrorist attack" in Belgorod.

In the Kyiv region that surrounds the capital, a Russian drone attack caused a fire to break out at a critical infrastructure facility, local officials said. They did not identify the facility further.

Shelling in the center of the Russian border city of Belgorod Saturday killed 24 people, including three children. A fur-

ther 108 people were wounded in the strike, regional governor Vyacheslav Gladkov said Sunday, making it one of the deadliest attacks on Russian soil since the start of Moscow's invasion of Ukraine 22 months ago.

Russian authorities accused Kyiv of carrying out the attack, which took place the day after an 18-hour Russian aerial bombardment across Ukraine killed at least 41 civilians.

Russia's Defense Ministry said it identified the ammunition used in the strike as Czech-made Vampire rockets and Olkha missiles fitted with cluster-munition warheads. It provided no additional information, and The Associated Press was unable to verify its claims. "This crime will not go unpunished," the ministry said in a statement on social media.

In an emergency meeting at the U.N. Security Council demanded by Russia Saturday night, envoy Vasily Nebenzya accused Kyiv of a "terrorist attack." In comments carried by Russian state media, Nebenzya claimed Ukraine had launched "a deliberate act of terrorism directed against civilians."

# North Korea's Kim vows to launch 3 more spy satellites and produce more nuclear materials in 2024



AGENCIES  
SEOUL, 31 DECEMBER

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un vowed to launch three additional military spy satellites, produce more nuclear materials and introduce modern attack drones in 2024, as he called for "overwhelming" war readiness to cope with U.S.-led confrontational moves, state media reported Sunday.

Kim's comments, made during a key ruling Workers' Party meeting to set state goals for next year, suggest he'll intensify a run of weapons tests ahead of the U.S. presidential elections in November. Observers say Kim believes a boosted nuclear capability would give him another chance to launch high-stakes summit diplomacy with the U.S. to win sanctions relief if

former President Donald Trump returns to the White House.

During the five-day meeting that ended Saturday, Kim said anti-North Korea moves by the United States and its followers have been unprecedented this year, pushing the Korean Peninsula to the brink of a nuclear war, according to the official Korean Central News Agency. Kim cited the expansion of U.S.-South Korean military exercises and the temporary deployment of powerful U.S. military assets such as bombers and a nuclear-armed submarine in South Korea -- steps the allies have taken in response to the North's weapons testing spree since last year.

# US Navy destroys Houthi boats attempting to board a container ship on Red Sea

AGENCIES  
LONDON, 31 DECEMBER

The US Navy has destroyed Houthi "small boats" attempting to board a container ship on Red Sea, the media reported.

Four vessels from Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen fired upon the Maersk Hangzhou and got to within metres of the ship, the US military said, the BBC reported.

Helicopters from nearby US warships responded to a distress call and after being fired upon, sunk three of them "in self-defence", the BBC reported.

The crews were killed and the fourth boat fled the area. The Houthis have been attacking ships in the Red Sea since November, the BBC reported.



The Iranian-backed Yemeni rebel group have claimed its attacks on the vital shipping lane are directed at vessels linked to Israel, in response to the war in Gaza. The commercial ship attacked, the Maersk Hangzhou, is registered to Singapore and operated and owned by a Danish firm, US Central Command (Centcom) said.

Maersk says it has paused sailings through the Red Sea

for 48 hours, BBC reported.

The four Houthi boats attacked at around 6.30 p.m. Yemeni time with mounted weapons and small arms, getting to within 20 metre (66 feet) of the container ship, which the crew "attempted to board".

The ships crew issued a distress call and a security team returned fire, the statement said.

Helicopters from the nearby USS Eisenhower aircraft

carrier and USS Gravelly destroyer responded to the call for help and were shot at while "in the process of issuing verbal calls to the small boats", the BBC reported.

The helicopters "returned fire in self-defense, sinking three of the four small boats, and killing the crews", Centcom said. It added that the fourth boat "fled the area" and no damage had been recorded to US personnel or equipment.

It was the second attack on the Maersk Hangzhou in 24 hours, after it was attacked with missiles on Saturday, BBC reported.

The anti-ship missiles were fired from Houthi-controlled areas as the destroyers Gravelly and Laboon responded on Saturday, according to a previous Centcom statement.

# Venezuela says troops will stay deployed until British military vessel leaves waters off Guyana

AGENCIES  
MEXICO CITY, 31 DECEMBER

Venezuela said Saturday it will continue to deploy nearly 6,000 troops until a British military vessel sent to neighboring Guyana leaves the waters off the coast of the two South American nations.

In a video posted to X, Venezuelan Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino appeared surrounded by military officers in front of a marked up map of Venezuela and Guyana, a former British colony. Padrino said the forces are "safeguarding our national sovereignty."

"Armed forces have been deployed not just in the east of the country, but across the entire territory," he said. "They will be there until this British imperialist boat leaves the disputed waters between

Venezuela and Guyana."

The Defense Ministry confirmed to The Associated Press that the video was made at a military base in Venezuela's capital, Caracas. The video comes after weeks of tensions between the two countries over Venezuela's renewed claim to a region in Guyana known as Essequibo, a sparsely populated stretch of land roughly the size of Florida that is rich in oil and minerals. Operations generate some \$1 billion a year for the impoverished country of nearly 800,000 people that saw its economy expand by nearly 60% in the first half of this year.

Venezuela has long argued it was cheated out of the territory when Europeans and the U.S. set the border. Guayana, which has controlled the zone for decades, says the original agreement was legally binding and the dispute should be decided by the International Court of Justice in the Netherlands.

The century-old dispute was recently reignited with the discovery of oil in Guyana, and has escalated since Venezuela reported that its citizens voted in a Dec. 3 referendum to claim Essequibo, which makes up two-thirds of its smaller neighbor. Critics of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro say the socialist leader is using the tensions to distract from internal turmoil and stoke nationalism in the lead up to presidential elections next year. In recent weeks, the leaders of Guyana and Venezuela promised in a tense meeting that neither side would use threats or force against the other, but failed to reach agreement on how to address the bitter dispute.

# Pakistan poll panel rejects nomination papers of PTI bigwigs, party cries foul



AGENCIES  
ISLAMABAD, 31 DECEMBER

Nomination papers of top leadership of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) for the February 8 general elections failed to clear the scrutiny after which the party cried foul, local media reported.

PTI founder Imran Khan's nomination papers from NA-122 (Lahore) and NA-89 (Mianwali) were rejected due to his conviction in the Toshakhana case and some pending dues, Dawn reported quoting Isakhel Assistant Commissioner Gh---u-lam Murtaza as saying.



Murtza said that he got this information from Additional Deputy Commissioner (General), who is the returning officer of NA-89.

Nomination papers of PTI Vice Chairman Shah Mahmood Qureshi, PTI leader and former Punjab province governor Parvez Elahi, party

leader Hammad Azhar and party's women wing leader Amara Niazi were also rejected.

Most of the nomination papers were rejected due to defaulter of utility and other pending bills, Dawn said quoting sources.

Though the PTI candi-

dates failed to clear the scrutiny in initial phase, till January 3, they can approach an appellate tribunal against the decision of the respective returning officer, who in turn can adjudicate on these appeals till January 10.

Crying foul after the poll panel rejected nomination papers of party bigwigs, party chairman Gohar Khan posted on X: "The state machinery is in full swing against PTI's candidates, whose proposers and secondors or they are being openly harassed, assaulted and pushed back from ROs' offices."

PTI secretary general Omar Ayub said: "If this pre-poll rigging continues unabated, the transparency of the election process is and will be called into question."

# World population up 75 million this year, standing at 8 billion on 1 January



AGENCIES  
31 DECEMBER

The world population grew by 75 million people over the

past year and on New Year's Day it will stand at more than 8 billion people, according to figures released by the U.S. Census Bureau on Thursday.

The worldwide growth rate in the past year was just under 1%. At the start of 2024, 4.3 births and two deaths are expected worldwide every

second, according to the Census Bureau figures.

The growth rate for the United States in the past year was 0.53%, about half the worldwide figure. The U.S. added 1.7 million people and will have a population on New Year's Day of 335.8 million people.

If the current pace continues through the end of the decade, the 2020s could be the slowest-growing decade in U.S. history, yielding a growth rate of less than 4% over the 10-year period from 2020 to 2030, said William Frey, a demographer at The Brookings Institution.

The slowest-growing decade currently was in the aftermath of the Great Depres-

sion in the 1930s, when the growth rate was 7.3%.

"Of course growth may tick up a bit as we leave the pandemic years. But it would still be difficult to get to 7.3%," Frey said.

At the start of 2024, the United States is expected to experience one birth every nine seconds and one death every 9.5 seconds. However, immigration will keep the population from dropping. Net international migration is expected to add one person to the U.S. population every 28.3 seconds. This combination of births, deaths and net international migration will increase the U.S. population by one person every 24.2 seconds.

# Family raises questions over death of Indian worker in Singapore

AGENCIES  
SINGAPORE, 31 DECEMBER

The family of a 23-year-old construction worker from Tamil Nadu, who died in a workplace accident in Singapore earlier this month, have been questioning about circumstances leading to the young man's death. Ponraman Eazhumalai, a concrete pump assistant, was caught between the chassis of a concrete pump truck and a retracting outrigger at a worksite in Jurong Road, The Straits Times reported.

Outriggers are retractable legs that extend out and away

from a concrete pump to provide stability and prevent it from tipping over. Ponraman was the breadwinner of the family, supporting his grandfather, parents, an older sister and a 13-year-old brother, none of whom is working.

Seeking answers, Ponraman's relatives hoped that the authorities would look into what exactly caused the fatal accident, which occurred at about 11.20 p.m. on December 2.

Ponmaran came to Singapore eight months back, and was employed by TMC Concrete Pumping Services.

According to the news report, he was standing at the back of the concrete pump truck putting away a steel plate when the mishap happened.

After the accident, he was able to walk away from the truck, but collapsed shortly afterwards. He was taken to a hospital in a private transport that was arranged by the main contractor of the project, China Railway 11 Bureau Group Corp.

While Ponmaran died of his injuries the next day, the authorities have not mentioned what injuries he had.



# Govt made many strides towards insurgency-free NE India in 2023

The latest accord was signed with the pro-talks faction of the United Liberation Front of Asom



STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE  
NEW DELHI, 31 DECEMBER

2023 has been an eventful year for the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) when it made many landmark strides, including the latest accord with the pro-talks faction of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA).

The focuses of the MHA has been to make the North Eastern (NE) region insurgency-free. In this direction, a tripartite peace accord was

signed between the pro-talks faction of the ULFA, and the Central and Assam governments on Friday bringing to an end decades-old insurgency in the northeastern state. The accord was signed in presence of Union Home Minister Amit Shah at the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) at North Block here. Home Minister Amit Shah called it a "historic moment".

In April, a tripartite memorandum of settlement between the government of India, the government of

Assam and representatives of Dimasas National Liberation Army/Dimasas Peoples' Supreme Council (DNLA/DPSC) was also signed at the North Block to put an end to the insurgency in the Dima Hasao district of the state.

On November 29, the government of India and government of Manipur signed a peace agreement on agreed ground rules with United National Liberation Front (UNLFF), the oldest valley-based armed group of Manipur in New Delhi.

"It is a landmark achievement in realising Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision of all-inclusive development and providing a better future to the youths in Northeast India," the home minister had said then.

Following the peace agreement between the UNLFF, the government of Manipur and the government of India, leaders and cadres of National Revolutionary Front Manipur (NRFM) joined UNLFF on December 4.

On ethnic clashes in Manipur, the Central government extended to the state government one-time special assistance to the tune of Rs 101.75 crore for operation of relief camps for displaced people, a special package of Rs 209.45 crore for running schemes of relief and rehabilitation for victims/persons affected and grant-in-aid to the tune of Rs 89.22 crore for the scheme of complementary nutrition and personal hygiene support to the people living in relief camps.

On June 4, the government of India, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, notified a commission of inquiry under the Commissions of Inquiry Act, 1952 to inquire into the incidents of violence in the state of Manipur on May 3, 2023 and thereafter, it said. Realising Prime Minister Modi's vision of a peaceful and prosperous North-East India, the government of India decided to reduce the disturbed areas in Nagaland, Assam and Manipur under the

Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) on March 25.

The home minister also inaugurated and laid the foundation of several projects in the North Eastern region during his visit this year.

Besides, the North Eastern region, among other key developments included beginning of a new era in criminal justice system with passage of Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023; Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 and Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam, 2023; Jammu and Kashmir Reservation (Amendment) Bill, 2023; and Jammu and Kashmir Reorganization (Amendment) Bill, 2023 passed by Parliament.

Following the policy of zero tolerance against terrorism under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and guidance of Home Minister Amit Shah, the MHA declared four outfits 'terrorist organizations', seven individuals 'terrorist' and three organisations 'unlawful association' in 2023.

## J&K govt suppressing death of 3 civilians in Poonch: Mehbooba



STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE  
JAMMU, 31 DECEMBER

Raising objections to the Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) administration registering an FIR against "unknown" persons for the death of three civilians in Army's custody in Poonch, Mehbooba Mufti on Sunday said this indicates that efforts were being made to suppress the facts.

Speaking to mediapersons in Poonch, The PDP chief said faces of the Army and police personnel were clearly visible in the video of torture of the civilians that have gone viral. Why then was the FIR registered against unknown persons. Moreover, people of the village recognise the policemen who accompanied the troops.

She pointed out that so far,

only the Army personnel are accused of torturing the civilians while she was told by the people of the Topi Peer village that men of the special operations group (SOG) of the police were also involved in merciless beating of civilians after four soldiers were killed in an ambush by terrorists.

She further said that the police also accompanied the Army troops to the Topi Peer village and picked up the innocent people who had no connection with terrorists.

The PDP chief said that four seriously injured civilians were being treated in the military hospital and their relatives were not allowed to meet them.

People of Rajouri and Poonch have always been loyal the Indian Army and assisted it in several wars since 1947, she said.

Mehbooba claimed that the civilians were not only thrashed but chilly powder was also applied to their bodies while being tortured. The video of torture was deliberately leaked to create terror among the people. "The injured men who were hos-

pitalised in Rajouri said they were beaten by the SOG, the police and Army personnel," she said.

Commenting on recent visit of Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and Army chief General Manoj Pande to Rajouri where they met relatives of the dead civilians and also the injured, she asked why no action has been taken against the guilty.

The PDP chief said after allowing the J&K BJP chief Ravinder Raina and the National Conference (NC) leadership to visit the Topi Peer village, the administration allowed her also to come here but a heavy contingent of police stopped her midway. She was not even allowed to meet the injured people in the Rajouri hospital today, she said.

"The administration wants to hide these atrocities and doesn't want the women of killed persons to cry their heart out to me," Mehbooba said.

She urged the Lt. Governor Manoj Sinha to provide relief of Rs 50 lakh each to families of those killed and Rs 5 lakh to the injured.

## 'No invitation required to visit the house of God': RSS leader Indresh Kumar on Farooq Abdullah's remarks

AGENCIES  
NEW DELHI, 31 DECEMBER

On National Conference Chief Farooq Abdullah's statement about Lord Ram, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) leader Indresh Kumar on Sunday said that Lord Ram belongs to everyone and urged NC leader to convey this message to the leaders of the INDIA bloc, emphasizing that visiting God's house does not require an invitation.

Kerala Governor Arif Mohammad launched the "Ram Mandir Rashtira Mandir Ak Sahji Virasi" book at Rang Bhawan Auditorium, Delhi today.

The event was attended by dignitaries including Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) presi-

dent Alok Kumar, Shri Ram Janmabhoomi Teerth Kshetra Treasurer Govind Giri Maharaj, and RSS leader Indresh Kumar.

Indresh Kumar highlighted the shared identity of Indians and expressed that Farooq Abdullah's statement aligns with their beliefs. He encouraged Abdullah to communicate this inclusivity to the INDIA bloc, emphasizing that no invitation is needed to visit God's house. "Our dream identity is also the same that we think and dream in the Hindustani language and our face identity will always remain Indian, it can never change. Recently, Farooq Abdullah stated that Ram is not only yours but also ours. So when did we say no? Just explain this to your group also. You should tell this in INDIA

bloc too that there is no need of invitation to go to God's house," Indresh Kumar said. National Conference Chief Farooq Abdullah on Saturday emphasised that Lord Rama doesn't only belong to Hindus; he belongs to everyone in the world. "I also want to say to the whole nation that Lord Rama doesn't only belong to Hindus; he belongs to everyone in the world. He is the Lord for all the people across the world. It's written in the books," he added.

In addition, Indresh Kumar appealed to religious places to decorate their prayer spaces on January 22 from 11 am to 2 pm, encouraging people to watch the Consecration ceremony on television and pray for global progress.

## Shadow of a Covid wave powered by JN.1 variant looms over early 2024

AGENCIES  
NEW DELHI, 31 DECEMBER

As cases of the new Omicron sub-variant JN.1 continue to rise globally, including in India, there is a fear among many about a possible Covid wave early next year that may derail normalcy once again. Are these fears real?

India recorded 743 fresh cases of Covid-19 in the last 24 hours (as of Saturday). The total active caseload increased by seven, reaching 3,997, according to the Union Health Ministry.

A total of 162 JN.1 cases have been reported in India to date, with Kerala reporting the highest number at 83.

With this, the total count of coronavirus cases in India since its outbreak in January 2020 has reached 4,50,12,484. The death toll due to COVID-19 cases in India has risen to 5,33,358, reflecting seven deaths in the last 24 hours.

Globally, cases of JN.1 have been reported from the US, some European countries, Singapore and China. Maria Van Kerkhove, COVID-19 Technical Lead at WHO, said on Saturday that from a limited number of countries reporting, there has been a 35 per cent increase in Covid-19 hospitalisations and ICU admissions in the last month. "SARS-CoV-2, influenza

and other respiratory pathogens continue to be on the rise. Take measures to protect yourself from infection," she advised. Kerkhove said that JN.1 continues to rise in detection, but what matters is that Covid-19 is circulating in all countries.

"You can protect yourself from infection and severe disease. Mask, ventilate, test, treat, vaccinate: boost every 6-12 months depending on your risk group," she posted on X.

According to Dr Soumya Swaminathan, former DG, Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) the JN.1 Covid-19 variant is more transmissible and infectious as compared to other variants.

## Biswa in top gear, Gaurav Gogoi's future shaky, excluding AIUDF to hurt Oppn



AGENCIES  
GUWAHATI, 31 DECEMBER

The BJP has started preparations for the Lok Sabha

polls in Assam and the party's chief architect in the state Himanta Biswa Sarma has instructed party leaders to go to the people and explain the welfare schemes of both the Union and state government to them.

There are a total of 25 Lok Sabha seats in the northeast and Assam has the highest — 14 seats — among all the states in this region. The saffron camp has set a target of winning at least 22 seats in the northeast and this can only be achieved if the BJP wins 12-13 seats in Assam.

In the previous Lok Sabha polls, three Congress candidates won in Assam, namely Pradyut Bordoloi from

Nagaon, Gaurav Gogoi from Kalabor and Abdul Khaleque from the Barpeta constituency.

Gogoi's Kaliabor constituency no longer exists following the delimitation exercise. There is now a new Kaziranga Lok Sabha seat with a changed demography of voters. The BJP believes that they can easily win the new seat and Gaurav Gogoi has no chance of winning there.

Nagaon has been a BJP stronghold for the last two decades with senior party leader and former Union Minister Rajen Gohain winning the seat four times. Gohain was denied a tick-

et last time as he was accused in a molestation case, however this time he is a potential candidate there.

But there is a power struggle between Gohain and the next generation BJP leaders in Nagaon and if the infighting continues till the polls, then the BJP may find it difficult to win this seat back.

Khaleque's seat Barpeta is dominated by Muslim votes, but Badruddin Ajmal's party AIUDF will field a candidate there. If the contest becomes a triangular one, then the BJP has a good chance in Barpeta too.

Sarma also conducted an in-depth review meeting with all party MLAs and MPs

in the Tinsukia District. The leaders of the BJP's two allies — Asom Gana Parishad and United People's Party Liberal in Bodoland were also present in the meeting.

Sarma briefed the party leaders on the government's welfare schemes and asked them to keep an eye on last mile delivery. Much before the Opposition parties forged the INDIA bloc, the Congress in Assam was successful in bringing together 12 parties to form a unified Opposition forum to take on the BJP's fierce election machinery in the state under the leadership of Sarma.

The joint Opposition forum included Left parties,

Sivasagar MLA Akhil Gogoi's Rajior Dol party, former All Assam Students Union (AASU) leader Lurinjyoti Gogoi's Asom Jatiya Parishad (AJP), and others. But the joint forum lacks a prominent player in Assam politics, the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF).

Initially, Mamata Banerjee's Trinamool Congress (TMC) and Arvind Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) were also not given a place in the Opposition forum.

Following the announcement of the INDIA bloc, the situation changed to a great extent and both TMC and AAP are now constituents of the Opposition alliance.

## North-east gears up for New Year celebrations, sees surge in tourists



AGENCIES  
GUWAHATI, 31 DECEMBER

The major cities in the North-east have geared up to celebrate the New Year's Eve on Sunday, which have witnessed a surge in the tourist numbers from the different parts of the country.

The director of Kaziranga National Park, Sonali Ghosh said, "We have been witnessing a higher volume of tourists at the year-end. Earlier, tourists could only visit the central and western range of the park. But now we have a variety of options, including river tourism, trekking and cycling, etc., in the greater Kaziranga area. The bird festival is also coming up in a few days."

A senior official of the Assam government's tourism department told IANS, "Guwahati and Shillong top the chart for favourite destinations among the tourists. People visit Kaziranga National Park, Cherrapunji, etc. The hotels in the city have seen quite high numbers of bookings since Christmas."

The luxurious hotels in Guwahati have decked up to offer the guests a range of programmes.

According to a senior offi-

cial from Radisson Blu, one of the largest luxurious hotels in the region said, "The guests will welcome New Year with an extravagant gala dinner buffet along with interactive stations, live music at the courtyard, unlimited beverages and revel in the comfy ambience of our hotel on Sunday."

The 5-star hotel has also packed its menu in view of the tourists arriving from across the country.

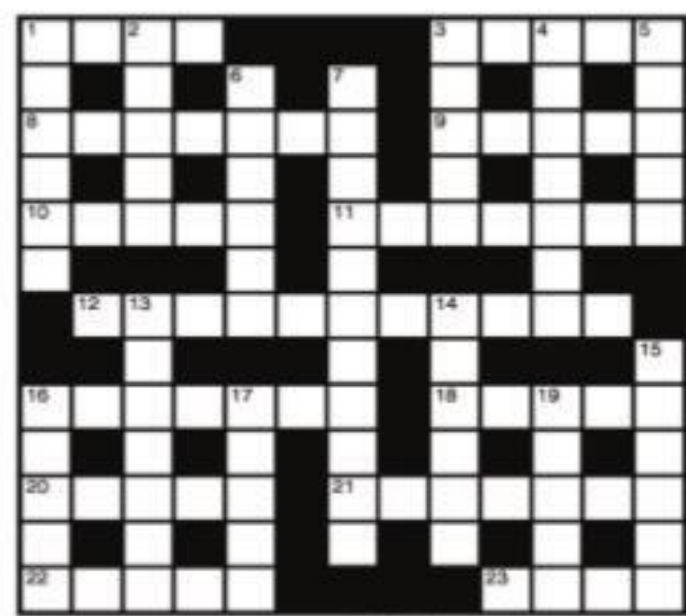
Meanwhile, the Commissioner of Police in Guwahati, Diganta Barah has cautioned the people to maintain the traffic rules and regulations.

"The police teams will be deployed in the city on New Year's Eve for citizens' safety and security. People should also maintain the regulations laid down by the government. Driving of vehicles in the intoxicated state will be strictly prohibited and law-breakers will face stern punishment," he said.

An official from another luxurious hotel Vivanta Guwahati told IANS, "The evening at our place promises to be an evening of fun and excitement for the guests with a choice of delectable cuisine, entertainment options.

### LEISURE

#### 10 MINUTE CROSSWORD



- ACROSS**  
1 Fruit (4)  
3 Twist forcibly (5)  
8 Flightless bird (7)  
9 In that place (5)  
10 Rid (5)  
11 Erratic (7)  
12 Disheartened (11)  
16 Card game (7)  
18 Dutch cheese (5)  
20 Slightest (5)  
21 Thickest (7)  
22 Bare (5)  
23 Feline mammal (4)
- DOWN**  
1 On time (6)  
2 Communion table (5)  
3 Humorous (5)  
4 Repeat (7)  
5 Cupidity (5)  
6 Arm muscle (6)  
7 Simple vote (4,2,5)  
13 Plunder (7)  
14 Inscription (6)  
15 Voice box (6)  
16 Punctuation mark (5)  
17 Fully satisfied (5)  
19 Make one (5)

**SOLUTIONS TO YESTERDAY'S CROSSWORD**  
ACROSS  
1 Hair, 2 Belle (Harebell), 3 Amazing, 9 Orbit, 10 Theme, 11 Indulge, 12 Quantum leap, 17 Trumpet, 19 Vague, 21 Equal, 22 Respond, 23 Split, 24 Germ.  
DOWN  
1 Hearty, 2 Image, 3 Broad, 4 Lobelia, 5 Either, 6 Give in, 7 Agriculture, 13 Unusual, 14 Lavish, 15 Stress, 16 Seldom, 18 Pilot, 20 Goose.

By arrangement with The Independent  
Figures in parentheses denote the number of letters in the words required

#### BETLE BAILEY/Mort Walker



#### RED EYE/Bill Yates & Mel Casson



#### DADDY DAZE/John Kovalski



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• Moolchand Medcity (Formerly Hospital) 42000000 & 24-hour Chemist Shop 42000447  
• Vidyasagar Institute for Mental Health and Neuro-Sciences 26924300, 26924304  
• Batra Hospital & Medical Research Centre 29051280, 29958747  
• Deen Dayal Upadhyay 25496320, 25494403  
• Guru Tegh Bahadur 22586262, 22585007

**RAILWAY INQUIRY**  
General inquiry 139  
• Toll Free Nos. 1800112511  
• SMS Inquiry Nos. 57886, 54959, 5676747

**ROADWAYS INQUIRY**  
• ISBT (General Inquiry): 23868836, 238655181  
• Haryana Roadways 23861262  
• Himachal Roadways 23717473, 23325320



**SCRABBLE BRAND G.R.A.M.S.**  
Instructions: Make a 2 to 7 letter word from the letters in each row. Add points of each word, using scoring directions at right. 7-letter words get 50-point bonus. "Blanks" used as any letter have no point value. All Judd's words are in the Official Scrabble Players Dictionary (Merriam-Webster) and CSW Official Scrabble Words (Chambers). Judd's solution is on page 10-12.

**PAR SCORE 125-135 by JUDD**

**FOUR RACK TIME LIMIT: 20 MIN**

**SCRABBLE BRAND G.R.A.M.S.**  
Instructions: Make a 2 to 7 letter word from the letters in each row. Add points of each word, using scoring directions at right. 7-letter words get 50-point bonus. "Blanks" used as any letter have no point value. All Judd's words are in the Official Scrabble Players Dictionary (Merriam-Webster) and CSW Official Scrabble Words (Chambers). Judd's solution is on page 10-12.

**PAR SCORE 125-135 by JUDD**

**FOUR RACK TIME LIMIT: 20 MIN**

22586262, 22585007

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**SUDOKU**  
Conceptis Sudoku  
By Dave Green

Difficulty Level ★★

Answer to previous puzzle

Sudoku is a number-placing puzzle based on a 9x9 grid with several given numbers. The object is to place the numbers 1 to 9 in the empty squares so that no row, no column and no 3x3 box contains the same number. The difficulty level increases through the week.



# Manipur's year of agony

JAGJIT TAKHELLAMBAM

Roiled by turmoil and bloodshed, the state of Manipur saw some of the darkest moments in its history in 2023. Ethnic violence erupted in the month of May, seemingly out of nowhere, and continues to flare up every now and then. Nearly eight months down the line, there is no indication that the situation is anywhere near being resolved.

The cost has been heavy - close to 200 lives lost, hundreds of homes destroyed and thousands of people displaced; more, the conflict has left communities traumatised, families shattered, the economy in tatters and the state split on ethnic lines. And as the year comes to an end, thousands of displaced people continue to languish in relief camps, facing an uncertain future.

For many in Manipur, the year had begun on a hopeful note. Covid was on the wane, insurgency was dormant, there was hope of economic activity picking up. N Biren Singh, on the verge of completing a year of his second term as chief minister, was firmly entrenched, although rumblings of discontent were beginning to be heard from amongst some MLAs of the ruling BJP. There was even a slice of glamour, with Imphal successfully hosting the grand finale of the Femina Miss India 2023 contest in April.

Everything changed in the month of May, as the state's ethnic fault lines cracked open and long-simmering tensions came to the boil.

The immediate trigger was an order of the Manipur High Court asking the state government to consider the demand by some sections of the Meitei community for inclusion in the Scheduled Tribe list and to send a recommendation to the Union government. But the seeds for the conflict were there well before this. The state government had begun a much-publicised crackdown on illegal poppy plantations in the hill districts from the beginning of the year, razing poppy crops and arresting cultivators and village chieftains. Moves to evict villages illegally set up encroaching on reserved forests had already resulted



in violent protests particularly in Churachandpur, even as many civil society organisations began raising the demand for identification of illegal immigrants and the implementation of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in the state.

The Manipur High Court's order, on a petition filed by the Meitei (Meetei) Tribe Union, was issued on 27 March, and made public on 19 April, which immediately provoked protests from tribal bodies.

On 3 May, a Peace Solidarity Rally was organised by All Tribal Student Union, Manipur (ATSUM) in the hill districts of Churachandpur, Tamenglong, Tengnoupal, Senapati, Kangpokpi, Chandel and Ukhrul against the High Court directive. The rally was peaceful in most places, except in Churachandpur, where a Forest Beat Office was set ablaze before protesters started attacking Meitei houses and properties at Torbung area, sending their residents fleeing. Similar violence took place in the

border town of Moreh.

Spurred by rumours and visuals of the violence spread through social media, retaliation by Meiteis began in the valley areas late that night and into the next day. Kuki-Zomi properties and individuals were targeted. BJP MLA Vunzjagin Valte was critically injured after being attacked in the streets of Imphal. Mobs looted thousands of arms from state police armouries. It took the authorities, who imposed an internet ban, round-the-clock curfew, and airlifted thousands of Army and Central paramilitary troops into the state, until 5 May to bring the violence under control, by which time the official death toll was 54, later to rise to 73. Thousands from both communities, meanwhile, fled to safer places, some taking shelter at security forces' camps, others fleeing to neighbouring Mizoram and other states. The total number of people displaced, eventually accommodated in various relief camps, stands now at

around 60,000.

On 12 May, ten MLAs belonging to the state's Kuki-Zomi community, including seven belonging to the ruling BJP, added fuel to the fire, as they issued a Press statement urging the Union government to carve out a "separate administration" under the Indian Constitution and let people from their community "live peacefully as neighbours with the state of Manipur". They levelled the charge that the violence was "supported by [the] existing government of Manipur".

The demand could not have been better calculated to put the Meitei community's back up, feeding as it did into suspicions that the long-term aim of the Kuki-Zomi community, bolstered by influx of illegal immigrants from Myanmar, and funded by drug money, was to carve out a homeland from Manipur's territory.

Union home minister Amit Shah reached the strife-hit state on 29 May, and stayed for three days, during which he held

discussions with state government authorities as well as civil society organisations of the warring groups. He later announced that a panel headed by a retired Chief Justice of a High Court would be constituted to probe the origins of the ethnic conflict. He also stated, categorically, that there is no question of disturbing the unity, integrity and territorial boundary of Manipur. An inter-agency unified command comprising State police, army, paramilitary forces was also constituted under the supervision of Security Advisor Kuldeep Singh.

But Mr Shah's visit made little difference to the situation, coinciding, in fact, with a fresh spurt in violence and arson. Many parts of the state, particularly the areas contiguous between the valley and the hills, came to resemble a war zone, complete with fortified bunkers and trenches, with armed civilians facing off across so-called 'buffer zones'. Farming became a hazardous activity, with gunmen firing at plains villages and farmers from the hill ridges. Raids and counter-raids became

routine, marked sometimes by atrocities, and increasingly involving armed militants on both sides. The conflict was also fought out in social media spaces and before global fora, as relations between the involved communities deteriorated to levels never seen before.

A peace committee set up by the Central government with the state Governor at its head never took off, as Kuki-Zomi bodies refused to participate because of the presence of N Biren Singh on the panel.

In July, just ahead of the Monsoon Session of Parliament, a video of two women being paraded naked in Kangpokpi district during the initial days of the outbreak of the violence surfaced, sparking nationwide outrage. It also caused Prime Minister Narendra Modi to break his silence on the Manipur violence. "My heart is filled with pain and anger over the incident in Manipur. The whole nation has been dishonoured," he said, as he vowed that no accused would be spared.

The Manipur issue also rocked the Parliament, with the Opposition parties demanding an elaborate debate and discussion on the issue. In the end, the Congress moved a no-confidence motion against the government. It was defeated, but the Opposition party said it was necessary to force the Prime Minister to make a statement on the issue.

The Supreme Court also took suo motu cognisance of the viral video, and said that the court was deeply disturbed and that it will take necessary steps if the government does not. It later constituted a team of retired women High Court judges - namely Justices Geeta Mittal, Shalini P Joshi and Asha Menon - to consider diverse aspects including measures for relief, rehabilitation, rebuilding homes and places of worship in the strife-torn border state.

It was also at the prodding of the Supreme Court that the bodies of 64 victims of the May riots lying in different hospital morgues were finally returned to their families this month.

Towards the fag end of the year, the Centre and the Manipur government on signed a peace agreement with a faction of Manipur's oldest insurgent outfit, United National Liberation Front (UNLF), making it the first outfit from Imphal valley to do so in the state's insurgency history of 59 years.

# Assam welcomes 2024 with hope of peace and progress

NAVA THAKURIA

Prior to the culmination of 2023, Assam witnessed a deal with the banned separatist militant outfit United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), paving the way for sustained peace, progress and developments in the far eastern part of the country. The historic tripartite peace accord was signed between the ULFA representatives and both governments in New Delhi and Dispur on 29 December. Union home minister Amit Shah, Assam chief minister Himanta Biswa Sarma, and more than a dozen top ULFA leaders headed by Arabinda Rajkhowa were present on the occasion in the national capital.

Welcoming the new year under the Gregorian calendar, the peace-loving people of north-east India now expect the ULFA (Independent) faction led by Paresh Barua to also join the national mainstream very soon. With the recent peace deal, over 8200 ULFA militants have come over ground, and they are expected to work for the people of Assam in different capacities. A number of long-standing political, economic, and social issues concerning Assam have been incorporated into the memorandum of settlement, which was appreciated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who also said it marked a significant milestone in Assam's journey towards peace and development.

After facing insurgency-related violence for decades, the bygone year, however, evaded militancy-engineered killings in the state. Enduring the peace initiative of the government, it largely enjoyed peace and tranquilly, and the tribal militancy almost came to an end. Sarma, also in charge of the state home portfolio, recently disclosed through his social media post that 'no lives were lost in Assam due to extremist violence in 2023'. He also added that Assam has transformed into an abode of peace, and the gradual removal of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act from most parts of the state can soon be realised.

In fact, since his first day as CMO, Sarma has continued to call on separatist militants to join the peace initiatives, while he personally requested Paresh Barua to come forward for peace talks as many ethnic militant outfits have already surrendered their arms. For the record, over 7,200 insur-

gents belonging to the Dimasas National Liberation Army, All Adivasi National Liberation Army, Adivasi Cobra Military of Assam, Adivasi Peoples' Army, Bircha Commando Force, Santhal Tiger Force, etc., have officially returned to the mainstream since May 2021. They have handed over more than 1,750 arms since Sarma sat on the hot seat, and his government has already spent Rs 305 crore on rehabilitating more than 8,750 former militants.

On the first day of 2024, while evaluating various government actions and welfare initiatives under the dynamic leadership of Sarma, who took oath as the state government chief on 10 May 2021 after the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won the legislative assembly polls, one may admit that he got national and international media attention with the relentless crackdown on drug traffickers and child marriage, harsh actions against the criminals, legal initiatives to arrest the corrupt government officers, commitment to end polygamy, and a number of innovative and effective beneficiary schemes during the bygone year.

The past year has continued to witness a series of incidents relating to the recovery of illegal drugs and the arrest of traffickers from various parts of the state. For records, the state agencies confiscated narcotics worth Rs 718 crore in 2023, which comprise heroin, methamphetamine tablets, opium, ganja, cough syrup, etc. No fewer than 4,719 drug peddlers were arrested by state police personnel. In February and October, the government agencies launched crackdown operations against the menace of child marriages and arrested nearly 5,000 people, most of whom are still fighting legal battles in various local courts.

During his address at the 77th Independence Day celebration in Guwahati, the young and energetic saffron leader committed to eradicating the social menace by 2026. Defying the outcry of various opposition leaders, he argued that the campaign against the illegal practice should continue in Assam. Now the government plans to ban the practice of polygamy by placing a Bill in the legislative assembly session scheduled for February 2024. He asserted that after targeting the child marriage menace, Assam has slowly improved in the sta-

tistics of maternal mortality and infant deaths.

The continued arrest of government officials, including administrative and police personnel, against corruption charges has amused the common people. Sarma himself revealed that the law enforcement agencies have apprehended over 125 government employees during his tenure. On the other hand, the accused criminals faced strong police actions, where 32 individuals died in police encounters and over 55 were injured. Even though the opposition parties and civil society representatives attacked Sarma for making the police force trigger happy, he maintained that the police personnel have operational liberty while facing criminals within the ambit of law.

Considering the hardship of rural women in their entrepreneurial engagements, the state government helped many of them by waiving bank loans so that they could recover their financial activities after the setback of the COVID-19-induced national lockdown. It has also extended help to the farmers with an effective paddy procurement policy. Launching Orunodoi 2.0, the government maintained its commitment to serve the beneficiaries in a better way. Nearly seven lakh new beneficiaries were added last year, and the selected card holders are specified to receive enhanced monthly support of Rs 1,250 through the direct transfer to bank account facility. More than 26 lakh poor families now get monthly financial relief so that they can spend it to fulfil various needs like healthcare, nutritious foods, children's education, electricity consumption, etc. The government also launched the third phase of the microfinance loan waiver scheme for the benefit of over 2.22 lakh women borrowers, for which the Assam government repaid Rs 291 crore of outstanding loans. With this special initiative under the Assam Microfinance Incentive and Relief Scheme 2021, the government helped the women borrowers come out of the debt trap and re-establish themselves as credit-worthy individuals to live a dignified life.

With an aim to support the farmers, the government effectively implemented the paddy procurement policies with the target of procuring up to seven lakh metric tonnes during the 2023-24 kharif marketing season. The initiative has benefited more than



60,000 farmers with the revised minimum support prices across the state. Under Mission Basundhara 2.0, over 1,500 indigenous families in the districts of Dibrugarh, Tinsukia, Charaideo, Sonitpur, Lakhimpur, Dhemajai, Darrang, Bongaigaon, Biswanath, Goalpara, Nalbari, Hojai, and Bajali were entertained with land settlement benefits.

Sarma has also taken personal initiatives to resolve the decades-long border disputes with neighbouring states. Arunachal Pradesh chief minister Pema Khandu came forward to ink a bilateral agreement in the presence of HM Shah to end the boundary debates with Assam. More discussions with the governments of Meghalaya, Nagaland and Mizoram are also going on in phased manners. President Droupadi Murmu approved the delimitation notification issued by the Election Commission of India in regard to the state's parliamentary and assembly constituencies. Even though the number of Lok Sabha seats (14) and assembly seats (126) remained intact, three more Bidhan Sabha constituencies were reserved for the scheduled tribes (STs) and one more for the scheduled castes (SCs) candidates.

The visionary leader decided to keep the CMO open (working) for 24 hours a day, arranging three shifts for the employees, so that people could be served better. One can observe Sarma attending his office in the night hours while returning to the state capital after a daylong official tour. He also reformed the office structure of district magistrates, giving more power and responsibility to the officer (now renamed District Commissioner). The state government can claim to have had 100 cabinet meetings in 28 months since the first cabinet was held

on 11 May 2021. Sarma has encouraged the state ministers, legislators, and selected government employees to stay in villages to understand the struggles and aspirations of rural families.

Assam has lately emerged as a potential state to register high growth in terms of the Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP), which evaluates the goods and services in a financial year for a state. The state increased its tax collection from Rs 558 crore (prior to the implementation of the Goods and Services Tax) to nearly Rs 7,100 crore, and Assam was the first state to ratify the GST. NITI Aayog also reported that Assam could bring over 47 lakh people out of multidimensional poverty from 2015-16 to 2020-21. After providing meaningful employment to over 85,000 individuals in various government departments, Dispur now prepares to complete the volume of one lakh government jobs that the nationalist party committed in its election campaigning. Offering engine-run two-wheelers to successful students of twelfth standard and computers to tenth standard in earlier occasions, the government now offers bicycles to over 3.69 lakh ninth standard pupils (of the government and provincialised schools). Some impressive steps include the decision to construct 4,000 state-of-the-art schools by 2028, converting 1,281 government-supported madrasas into ME schools, initiating Khel Maharan, Sanskritik Mahasangam, etc., celebrating the success of boxer Lovlina Borgohain (the first Assamese sportsperson to win an Olympics medal in Tokyo), planning to construct 1.3 lakh houses under the Mukhyamantri Awas Yojana as a complementary to Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, and announcing the Mukhya-

mantri Loksewak Arogya Yojana for the benefit of state government employees, their dependents, and pensioners deserve appreciation.

To celebrate the Bohag Bihu in a unique way, Assam set impressive records when over 11,000 folk dance performers unveiled their cultural heritage in front of PM Modi. Sarusajai Stadium turned into a world stage where the folk dancers, along with the Dhol, Pepa, Gagana, and Toka performers, showcased their solidarity, symphony, and purposeful performances. Lately, the historical Moidams (a kind of grave with an earthen mound) at Charaideo, the former seat of the Ahom kingdom, were nominated by the Union government for UNESCO recognition as a World Heritage Site. Assam also created a record by preparing 42.9 lakh handwritten essays by its residents on legendary Ahom warrior Lachit Borphukan.

A chair in the name of Srimanta Sankardev, the 15th-century saint, philosopher, and socio-cultural reformer, has been instituted at Jawaharlal Nehru University in the national capital. Sankardev's prime disciple, Madhabdev, is honoured with a cultural complex (Kalakshetra) at Narayanpur. The state also witnessed a mega plantation drive under the campaign of Amrit Brikshya Andolan, under which millions of commercial saplings were planted. It achieved a figure of over one crore saplings in a few days across the state, and more drives are scheduled to grow more trees. It only shows the commitment of 33 million Assam residents to establish a robust tree economy while addressing the global warming issues affecting Mother Earth.

The writer is a Guwahati-based special representative of The Statesman











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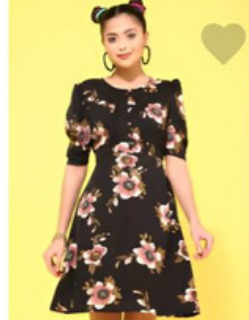
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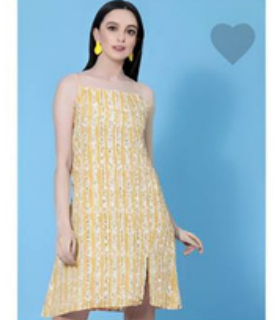
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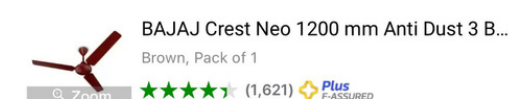
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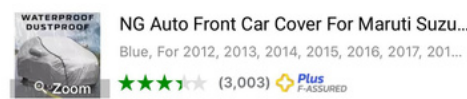
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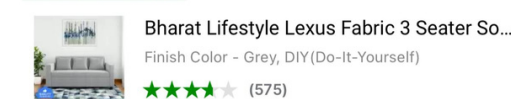
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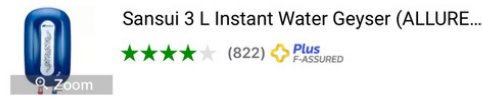
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